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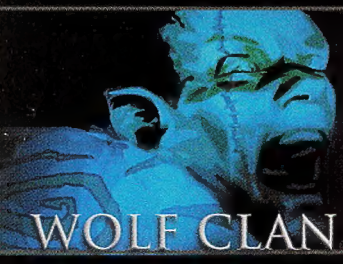

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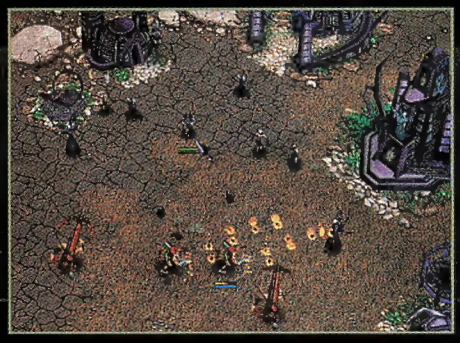

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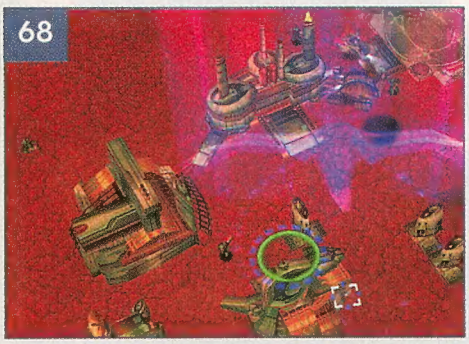

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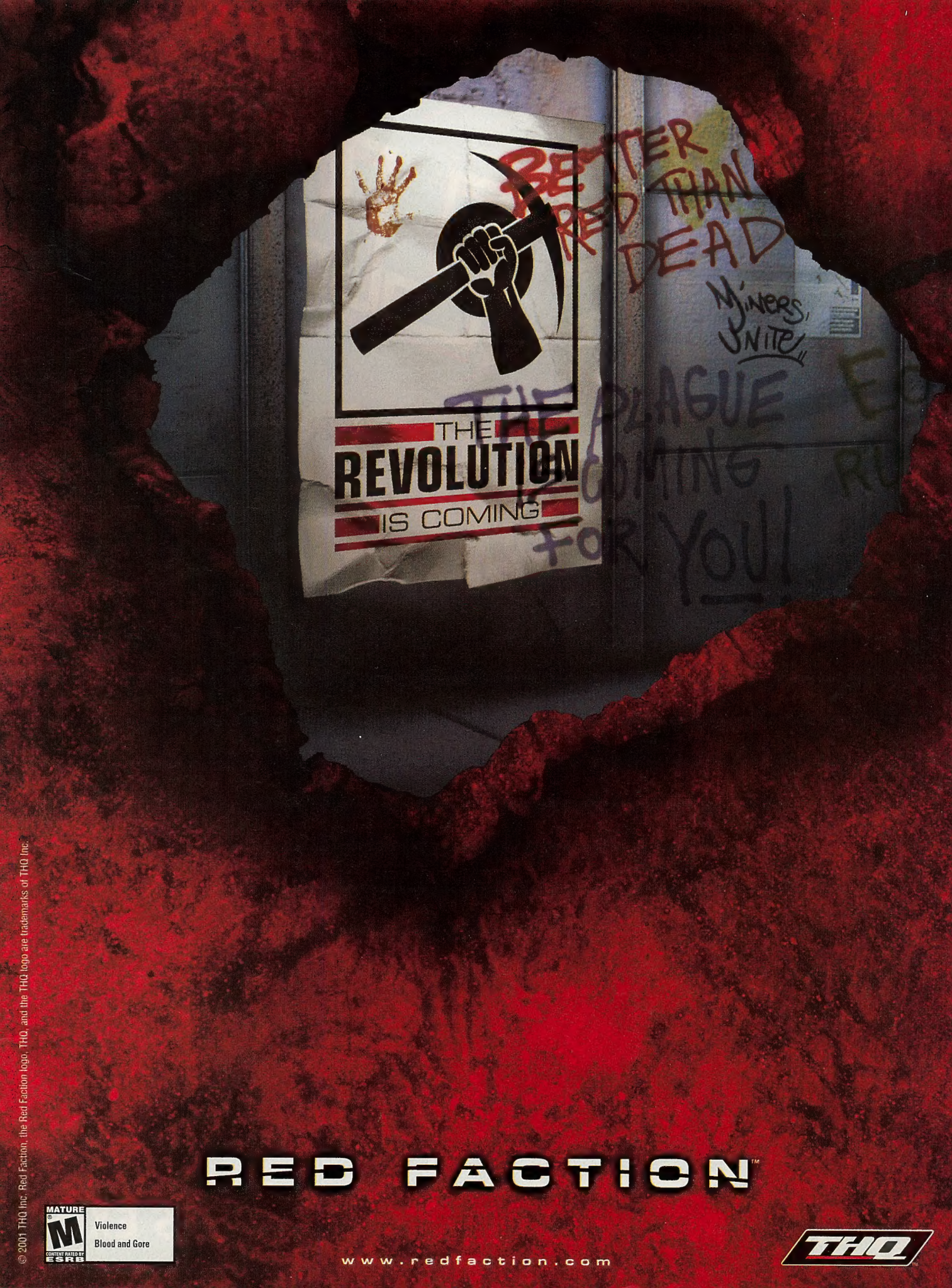

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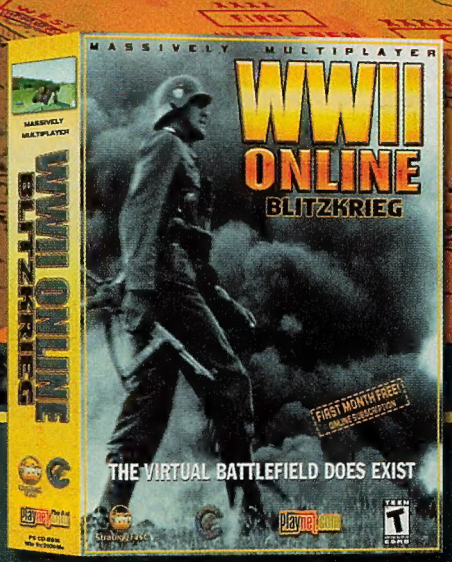

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Complaining about free software

Reading some computer gaming message boards is a bit like rubbernecking at a horrible traffic accident: you don't know why you do it, you hate yourself shortly thereafter, but you can't resist that primal urge to gawk. In the case of online discussions, you get an interesting peek at people posting under the mighty cloak of anonymity, wielding their poison keyboards like mighty sabers, bringing corporations to their knees, and cutting egotistical game designers down to size. Lurking provides an endless source of amusement.

There are times, however, when the groupthink mind of the giant, indefinable blob of "compulsive message-board posting gamers" moves from merely being entertainingly surreal to being utterly baffling. One particular target of irrational behavior is Valve Software, which had the audacity—the audacity!—to release *Deathmatch Classic* for *Half-Life*, a collection of re-made deathmatch levels and weapons from the original *Quake*, made with the full blessing of id Software.

The complainers' issue goes something like this: how could Valve take time from its schedule of delivering what it really owes us, a true sequel to the now three-year old *Half-Life* and/or the ephemeral product that is *Team Fortress 2*, to continue "milking" an old game? Reading between the posts, it's as if Valve, and by extension any company that makes a successful game, is contractually obligated to deliver an immediate sequel or another all-new product.

> "...Valve could have pumped out a Half-Life 2 in little time..."

There's hardly a question that Valve could have pumped out a *Half-Life 2* in little time—"little time" being relative for a company that delayed their first game a year or so. Instead of doing this, Valve has decided to "milk" its existing game in the form of offering constant upgrades and all sorts of extra free content. (Valve contracted out the two add-ons, *Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift*, to Gearbox Software, so their impact is, in theory, negligible.) In addition to *Deathmatch Classic*, Valve has also given gamers an updated *Team Fortress* and a little something called *Counter-strike*. For free.

It's entirely possible that delivering all of the freebies has sidetracked Valve from creating a proper sequel and/or *Team Fortress 2*, but that's irrelevant. Game companies "owe" us little beyond creating terrific, fully functional, games. And the flipside is true, that we as gamers "owe" game companies little beyond buying the games.

Even knowing that, some gamers go beyond just buying and playing; they visit these same message boards and deliver not only terrific commentary and analysis but also "free" hints and tech support. These same communities also enrich the game world by generating a significant amount of additional "free" content: new maps, levels, mods, and even total conversions that turn your original game into an entirely new one. The commitment shown by fans and communities is amazing.

However, if we would sing the praises of our fellow gamers who take the time and effort to craft free additional content—and we should, as they are the heart and soul of gaming, as a friend of mine likes to say—why would anyone criticize a company for doing the same thing? When a developer or publisher shows this level of commitment to its product—be it a Valve, or an Epic Games for releasing *Unreal Tournament* bonus packs, or an Ensemble Studios for giving out new maps for *Age of Empires II*, or a Maxis for adding new objects for *The Sims*—we should offer our support, not our derision. We should never discourage anyone—game companies or gamers—from supporting and producing additional materials for any existing games. We all win with this kind of support; a company engenders goodwill toward it and its future products, and most importantly, gamers get better value and more... stuff from and for their games. For free. And we can all probably agree that "free" is a decent price.

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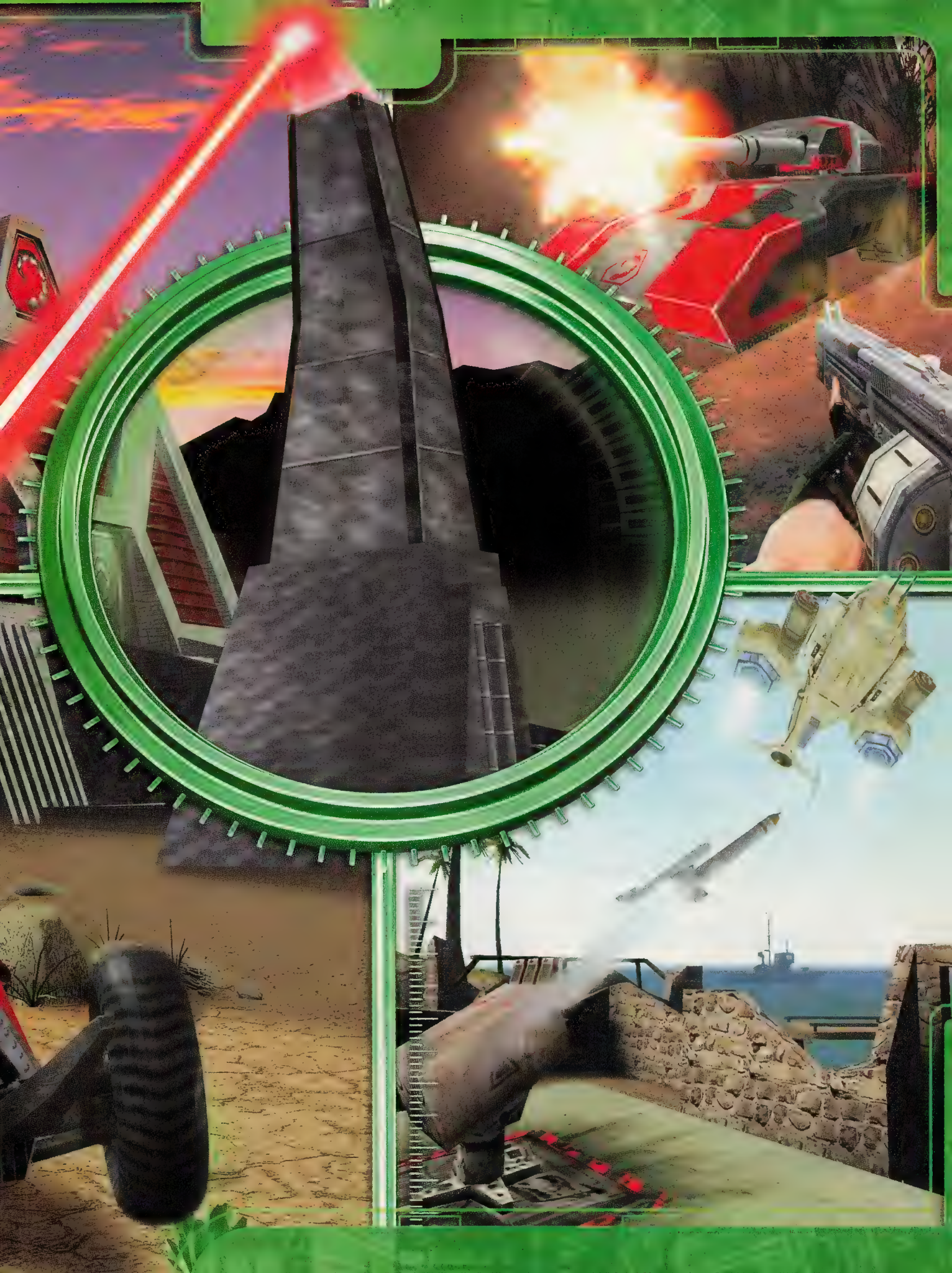

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EverQuest: idyllic fantasy, or Orwellian nightmare?

Good and Evil

Sony's Brad McQuaid on the ethics of exploiting EverQuest

by Robert Mayer

There's trouble in Norrath. An official Sony Online Entertainment post announced the crisis: "On June 4th, 2001, SOE banned and/or suspended 28 players belonging to the guild Conquest. Plainly put, they were cheating, we observed them cheating, they knew they were cheating, they admitted they were cheating, and they got caught." In essence, Sony felt that the guild used a combination of tactics and actions that *EverQuest* officials felt violated the rules and standards of behavior of the game. They disbanded the group, with some individual players suffering further disciplinary action. This highlights the underlying philosophy that drives game moderation in *EverQuest*.

More details of the incident, which involved alleged exploitations in conjunction with an epic battle at the end of the *Scars of Velious* expansion, can be pieced together from postings on the official game site (*www.everquest.com*) and from Lum the Mad (*www.lumthemad.net*), an often contentious but valuable bulletin board for multiplayer game aficionados.

Brad McQuaid, Vice President of Premium Games for Sony Online Entertainment, is responsible for fielding this kind of problem. As the man known to *EverQuest* players by his in-game avatar Aradune, he rides herd on the most successful massively multiplayer role playing game ever. He's been instrumental in shepherding the project from the pie in the sky dream of a couple of *Dungeons & Dragons* fans to the industry's flagship pay-to-play title. His day-to-day actions shape the online lives of hundreds of thousands of devoted *EverQuest* players, in a manner reminiscent of the power of a feudal lord.

Like a medieval baron, though, sometimes McQuaid has to deal with uprisings such as this one, and it's this part of his job that probably accounts for much of the wear and tear he's experienced over the past four years. It goes with the territory, though—when you create a virtual world, you have to be prepared for very real problems, problems that mirror those of the real world all too closely. And while some games adopt a fairly loose approach to game world moderation, *EverQuest* takes a different tack. In Sony Online Entertainment's game, when the company says "you're in our world now," you'd better believe it. The folks running Norrath have a very specific idea of how their world works, and how players should act while visiting.

Bugs and battles

Asked about the possibility that game moderators are not clearly identifying what constitutes illegal behavior in game, McQuaid defended current practices, though he allowed that Sony might not have been communicating them effectively. "We are labeling exploits as we always have—that being using bugs to your advantage in-game," he asserts. "Conquest *[the guild in question in the latest incident]* used spell stacking bugs to their advantage and they used a safe zone—an area where a pathing bug made it such that an NPC wouldn't pursue those it was mad at—to their advantage."

"Taking advantage of bugs is *not* okay [his emphasis], and we're saying that 1) knowing you're exploiting a bug, and 2) where and to what end you're exploiting, are both factors in determining how we react to a player or players who are exploiting." What's McQuaid is effectively saying is that players in *EverQuest* are responsible for both being aware of what is and isn't a bug, and for not exploiting any such anomalies they discover, a policy McQuaid asserts is common across all massively multiplayer role-playing games.

Fairness

The reason, he says, is fairness. "If you take advantage of a dupe bug, you can hurt the

> "Taking advantage of bugs is not okay, and we're saying that 1) knowing you're exploiting a bug, and 2) where and to what end you're ex-ploiting, are both factors in determining how we react to a player or players who are exploiting."
>
> Brad McQuaid VP, Sony's Premium Games

economy, and ruin the play experience of hundreds if not thousands of other players. If you take advantage of a pathing bug and kill a monster to obtain loot that you really shouldn't be able to, then the guy who did work harder to obtain that same loot without exploiting is not going to feel very entertained. Rather, he's going to feel frustrated and perhaps even regret that he did it the 'right way.'"

He points out that it's the same as it is in real life. "Society is generally *not* okay with taking short cuts (especially at the expense of others). Insider trading is not okay. Cutting through a parking lot to avoid traffic is not okay. Embezzling and stealing and cheating to advance oneself at the expense of others is *not* okay. And so why should it be okay in the communities and societies that are being developed in online computer games? Because it's a game? Are my sense of accomplishment and feelings about right and wrong somehow less valid inside virtual reality than they are in the real world? No man is an island, and that includes a person in Norrath."

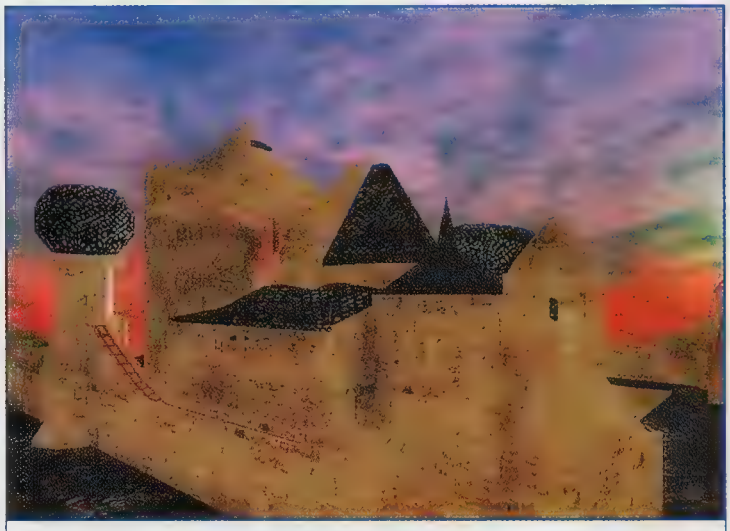
McQuaid freely admits that he's failed to communicate *EverQuest* policy effectively, given the firestorm of criticism that seems to accompany every action Sony takes involving player discipline. As for the bigger question of whether it's fair to expect players to police what are in effect the developer's coding errors and testing failures, he gets a tad defensive.

"It's Verant's responsibility to make sure we are offering an entertaining and fair play environment for our customers," he agrees. "And so we fix bugs, and we also crack down on players who would use bugs to cheapen the playing experience of others." But when asked whether it's unfair to make players responsible for working around the game's coding problems, he draws the line. "I disagree that it's unethical to blame a player for taking advantage of a bug. If a person leaves the door open at their place of business, thereby creating a hole in the company's security, yes, it's the person's fault for doing this. But that doesn't mean it's okay for someone to come along and enter the building, taking advantage of the open door. He gets blamed too."

What is a bug?

What is left undetermined in all of this is still the question of what is a bug, and what is just sloppy coding—and if there's a difference. McQuaid is adamant that it's pretty clear when players are gaining an unfair advantage, though many players of *EverQuest* would differ on this. "Taking advantage of coding or data problems can in some cases abuse other players," McQuaid says, an assertion that lies at the heart of his hostility towards exploiters. Still, many gamers in Norrath maintain that what Sony sees as an obvious bug, others see as merely an opportunity. Lacking the overall vision of what the game *should* be, players are forced to experience it as it *is*.

This Elf contemplates the question: Exploit, or Tactic?



Is Sony hunkering down behind walls of confusing policies? Or are they building a better world online?

McQuaid has consistently maintained that what Conquest was punished for were things clearly identifiable as proscribed exploits; others have disagreed. On the one side you have the idea that players can and must perceive the intent of the game designers, while on the other is the idea that any action permitted by the game's code is fair game—if Sony doesn't like it, patch it away. As more and more online games debut, and more and more players start to poke around in persistent worlds, these issues are likely to multiply. When does smart play end and cheating begin? In *EverQuest*, the answer seems to be either "whenever you are getting an unfair advantage," or "whenever Sony feels like it," depending on your perspective. ●

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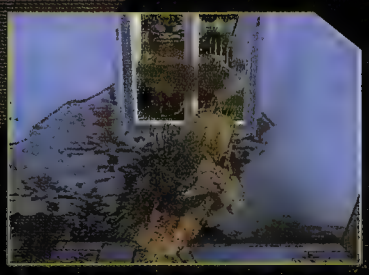

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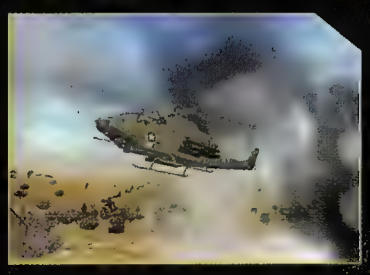

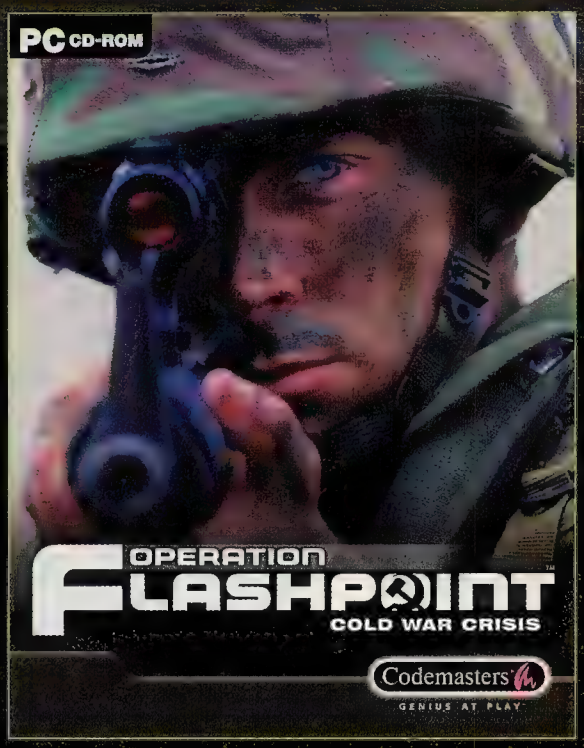

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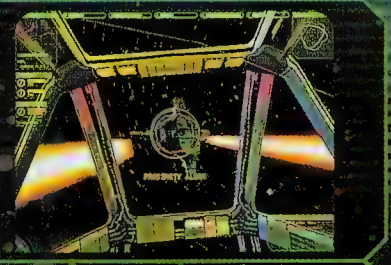

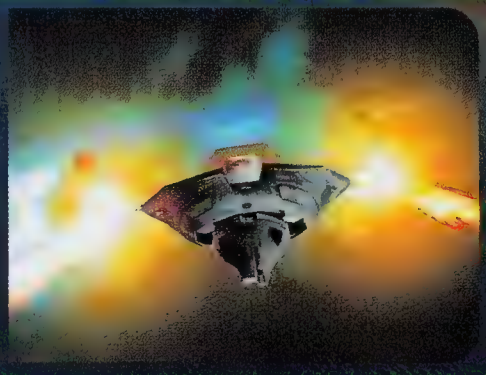

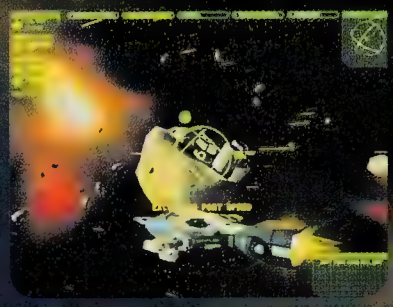

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There will not be cooperative single-player AI per se, but you will see guys on your side.

Son of a Beach

Battlefield: 1942 takes us back to Normandy

by Cindy Yans

Anyone remember *Codename Eagle*? Swedish developer Digital Illusions brought that to the table in March 2000. Even at that time, it was working on something a lot more ambitious... something that it knew would touch a large fan base, because hey, who doesn't love a new take on Dubya Dubya Two The Big One?

Now in the publishing arms of Electronic Arts, *Battlefield: 1942* is a single- and multiplayer 3D tactical shooter that will bring you directly into the center of World War II. The multiplayer component will support up to 64 players per game, 32 per side, which is not necessarily massively multiplayer in the true sense, but it's still a lot of troops. In order to emerge victorious you will have to make the best use of combined arms tactics with an enormous number of resources, combining tanks and dive-bombers, submarines and carriers, and machine gun nests with AA-artillery.

You'll encounter over 16 historical campaigns over four different areas of the world including North Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, and the Pacific, with scenarios surrounding D-Day, Iwo Jima, Stalingrad, El Alamein, and many more WWII battles. Six character types, each equipped with unique weapons and abilities, destructible terrain, 16 infantry weapons, and 3D sound all figure into the mix.

Looking at the product at a very early stage, the number of detailed drivables and flyables is already very impressive. The game thus far includes the Jeep, the Kubelwagen, the Sherman, T34, and PzKw IV tanks, the King George V Class and Yamato Class battleships, a Gato Class Sub, the P-51 Mustang, BF-109, B-17 Flying Fortress, and JU 87 Stuka, to name only a few. Right clicking on any one of them puts you directly into the driver's (or pilot's) seat, and many vehicles can hold more than one unit. Up to about five people may take charge of the various operational aspects of the vehicles, such as multi-positioned gun turrets. There will be three camera angles available, but third-person will probably not be available for foot soldiers or tanks because it would provide too distinct an advantage. Aircraft, however, will utilize that point of view.

Inspired by *Saving Private Ryan, Kelly's Heroes, Eagle's Nest, Cross of Iron, Das Boot, The Naked and the Dead* and many more, this is not a frag-fest game. In one sense it's very realistic, especially in the recreation of the units, vehicles, weapons, uniforms, and locales. But true grognards might flinch at the "design for fun rather than for true reenactment" philosophy.

Producer Ken Balthaser and his team have developed a long-term relationship with *Codename Eagle*, continuing to play it even now (no, really). They feel that if Digital Illusions manages to combine *Eagle*'s initial fun factor of on-the-fly FPS gameplay with a more robust single-player game, they'll really have something to offer to players who don't enjoy things like *World War II Online*'s exhaustively realistic approach to game design. ("Take 2 didn't really provide the time to polish it [*Codename Eagle*] up..." said associate producer Jamil Dawsari. We're not going to let that happen.")

This is not a Jane's game, but it looks like one, and if all goes well, there will be a lot of excited would-be GIs on the prowl when the product ships next spring. ●

SHAREWARE SPOTLIGHT

Bejeweled

PopCap Software [www.popcap.com]

Bejeweled has been kicking around the web as a java game for some time. You may have played it on Microsoft's MSN Gaming Zone, or on developer PopCap Software's site as *Diamond Mine*. If you haven't yet tried this wickedly addictive puzzle game, then you might as well start with the new Windows version, available as a free download on PopCap's website. You're presented with a field of eight by eight gems; you can click on any two adjacent gems to make them swap places, and if you can line up three or more identical gems in a row, those gems will disappear and new gems will drop down to take their place. In timed mode it gets pretty challenging, but putting the game down is the real challenge. —*Benjamin E. Sones*

Fairway to Heaven

Sid Meier hits the links with SimGolf

by Cindy Yans

This elaborate course looks as though the owner has been at the game for quite a while.

Yet another light bulb appeared one day over the head of Firaxis founder and *Civilization* master, Sid Meier. He offered this whimsical title to Maxis, and Will Wright, lord of all the *Sim*-whatevers, liked the idea and hence was born *Sid Meier's SimGolf*. When you think of a golf sim, the *Links* and *Tiger Woods* games come to mind, but when you think Meier and Wright, it's literally a whole new ball game.

The idea here is to design a golf course and resort, and to make it as financially successful and popular as possible. Similar to most of the Maxis sims, you start from scratch with a set of clever design tools, and put together a bare-bones course via a simple drag-and-drop interface. The slicker your design, the more it will attract players who will provide enough cash for you to add nifty things like vendors, landscapers, hotels, pools and so on. And of course, the same set of folks who liked to torture their characters in *The Sims* by bricking them into closets until they starved, or taking away a swimmer's pool ladder, can have a similarly sadistic time here. Ugly courses with three-feet-long fairways, for instance, will create unhappy golfers who will sneer, throw their clubs into the lake, and leave.

You can play in sandbox mode or career mode, design in 16 unique locations around the world, and may also import your *The Sims* characters. You'll be able to play through the course you have designed, share it with others, and host tournaments, although the mechanical controls will be a lot less detailed than those found in hard core golf simulations. *SimGolf* will allow you to "guide" the ball gently or aggressively, and if you do manage to beat opponents, you'll win a cash purse and gain experience to allocate toward perfecting more specific golfing skills.

Created using the unique gameplay style for which both Meier and Wright are known, this conceptually simple strategy game is bound to bring yet another eighteen hole round of enjoyment to players later this Fall. ●

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

Ray Muzyka, Joint CEO of BioWare, the company behind the *Baldur's Gate* games and *Neverwinter Nights*

"I'm playing quite a few things now—usually between midnight and two in the morning since that's the only free time I can usually find! I usually play several games each day since I want to stay current with a variety of titles. I'm mainly focusing on console titles right now, though I still play PC games every couple days as well. On the console front I'm currently playing *Dynasty Warriors 2*, *Oni*, *Red Faction*, *Onimusha*, *Summoner*, and *Dark Cloud* for PS2, and *Legend of Dragoon* and *Chrono Cross* (just about to start this one again since I never got too far in it the last time I played it) for PS1. I also just started *Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Seasons* for the Game Boy Color/Advance (the original GBC *Link's Awakening* was a great game). On the PC front, I finished the demo for *Serious Sam*, which was a lot of fun, a couple of days ago and I am playing through *Emperor: Battle for Dune* now."

Ian Currie, Sirtech, designer of the Jagged Alliance games

"I've been playing *Evil Islands* lately. It's incredibly challenging and slow paced, but the character development has me hooked. Before this, I had taken up *Asheron's Call* again because I just needed a character development fix, and before that *Deus Ex*. This is going to sound self-serving, but I was considering starting another game of *Jagged Alliance 2*... it only makes sense that I like it since I tailored it to my own tastes. Occasionally, I play *Age of Empires II* as I find it to be an outstanding game. My next game to try (sitting on my desk) is *No One Lives Forever*, which everyone tells me I *have* to play."

John Tiller, developer of the *Battleground* (TalonSoft) and *Panzer Commander* (HPS) series.

"I am working on (and playing!) a squad-level Vietnam game called *Squad Battles: Vietnam*, the first of two covering that war at the small unit level. The game includes Army and Marine battles ranging from single squad up to the battalion level, throughout the war including major actions such as Tet and Hamburger Hill. The second game *Squad Battles: Tour Of Duty* will focus primarily on cavalry actions including Ia Drang as well as river operations."

Frog City is focusing on simplifying the interface for setting up trade routes.

Frog Trading

Trade Empires

by Tricia Gray

Deep in the heart of San Francisco's Sunset District, among the dozens of Chinese markets, Thai restaurants, and noir video stores, lies one of the Bay Area's overlooked small developers, Frog City Software, creator of *Trade Empires*. Co-founders Rachel Bernstein and Ted and Bill Spieth started the company on a dare. Bernstein was porting a game in 1994 and had the designing brothers over to check it out. "They told me that the game was lame," recalls Bernstein. "So I said, 'let's see you do a better game.'"

That's exactly what they did, creating their first game *Imperialism*. After the success of *Imperialism* and its sequel, the team has moved on to *Trade Empires*, which is being published by Eidos. "We were really influenced by *Railroad Tycoon* when developing this game," explains Ted Speith, the game's designer. Like *Railroad Tycoon*, *Trade Empires* is a detailed top-view strategy game with trading and economics. "Merchants throughout history drove the start of civilizations," remarks Bernstein. "It's all about making a better life through varied shopping."

The game is set in many eras throughout history including ancient Sumeria, the Shang Dynasty, the Roman Empire, the First Silk Road, the Islam and Byzantine Eras, the Indian Ocean Trade epoch, the European High Middle Ages, and during Atlantic Trade. Your job is to strategically create and control trade in the given periods. Each episode offers different resources and technology in relation to its time-period. You build markets near resources, explore, and create a trade business by mapping routes to customers and hiring employees with special skills to help your markets grow. In order to beat out the other merchant families, you must keep up with the demands of the townspeople. The more sophisticated the town grows the more work you have to do.

Frog City is working to eliminate micromanagement of your technological advances; as improved transportation becomes available, you can simply update a small set of route plans and all your merchants automatically upgrade to the new vehicles. Famine, floods, and war can also affect markets. Thinking ahead by storing items or hiring bodyguards might be a smart idea. But for those of you bloodthirsty gamers whose eyes lit up when you saw the word "war," you may be disappointed. While war is part of the simulation, there is no combat in the game.

Frog City hopes *Trade Empires* mimics the success of its past titles when it's released in September. ●

DEAD TREES

Game Design: Theory and Practice

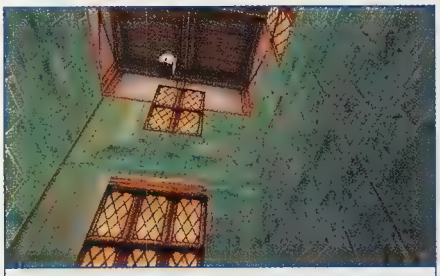
Author **Richard Rouse III**
Publisher **Wordware Publishing**
Retail Price **$49.95**

You don't have to be a game developer—or even a game developer wanna-be—to appreciate Richard Rouse's *Game Design: Theory and Practice*. Sure, it examines the actual design process (it even includes a mock design document), and it presents some interesting theories about creating compelling gameplay mechanics without getting too wrapped up in programming jargon and the specifics of implementation. But even the casual game enthusiast will appreciate interviews and insights from past and present industry veterans such as Sid Meier (*Civilization, Pirates! Railroad Tycoon*), Ed Logg (*Asteroids, Centipede, Gauntlet*) and Will Wright (*SimCity, The Sims*). —*Benjamin E. Sones*

Online Real Estate

With the Dark Majesty expansion, Asheron's Call creates a few new homes

by Benjamin E. Sones



The expansion pack features a new landmass, new dungeons, new quests, and quite possibly this building.

There's no place like home. That's the main selling point for *Dark Majesty*, the first retail expansion pack for Microsoft's signature massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Asheron's Call*. Though the game has received regular free updates since its launch in 1999, this is the first time that Microsoft has asked players to cough up any cash aside than the monthly subscription fee. The planned retail price for the add-on ($19.95) is rather low, however, and it contains the full game in addition to the add-on and comes with a free month of playtime for both newbies and registered players alike. It also comes with a lot of new content, including a new landmass, new monsters, new quests... and the oft-requested ability to buy and own houses.

While various shards of *Ultima Online* rapidly succumbed to over-development as far too many houses started to pop up all over the landscape, developer Turbine hopes to keep potential problems under control by rolling out the housing slowly and strictly controlling the availability and placement. There will only be around 1,000 houses per server to start with; where things go from there has yet to be determined. Turbine isn't revealing how much houses will cost, although they have stated that there will be both a purchase cost and an upkeep cost.

Another new feature—secure item storage—comes part and parcel with the new real estate feature. Each house will contain a storage chest that can only be accessed by authorized players. Of course you'll also have control over who is and who is not allowed inside the house itself.

The new landmass is called Marae Lassel. It will be fairly large and feature several new towns, new dungeons, and a continuation of the game's central story. What will that entail? "We don't want to give everything away," says *Dark Majesty* producer Nik Davidson, "but suffice to say that the name of the Expansion Pack is a big clue." ●

Goin' to the Shooter in the Sky

NovaLogic drops the sim pretense with Comanche 4

by Robert Mayer

The RAH-66 Comanche over a rather cool body of water.

NovaLogic marketed its first three *Comanche* games as serious flight sims, complete with claims of realism and authenticity in press releases and on the boxes. While the titles sold reasonably well, reviewers were quick to point out the discrepancy between the publisher claims and actual gameplay. Whatever the spin, *Comanches* 1-3 were simply graphically attractive, fast-paced arcade games with a modicum of real-world trim.

After years of stubbornly defending its sim niche, NovaLogic has finally decided to come clean, pitching *Comanche 4* as "a shooter in the sky." And why not? The company's titles have generally sold well, and the hardcore sim market isn't exactly boiling over at the moment. Playing to the company's strengths seems to be a good idea, and one that producer Wes Eckhard is taking to with enthusiasm. "It'll blow you away," he promises. "This will be a very fun, fast-paced game which is easy to fly, so that players can focus on enemy air and ground attacks."

You can expect the usual NovaLogic assortment of mission environments, from tropical jungles to arid deserts and some urban areas as well. Everything will be 3D (voxels have been given their walking papers at last, it seems), including the cockpit, and there will be a wide assortment of real-world weapons to wield and contend with. The real Comanche, the Army's hot new light attack and reconnaissance helicopter, sports a 20mm cannon, 70mm rockets, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and Hellfire anti-tank missiles, and you'll be able to use these in the game against enemy targets, some of which will be firing missiles of their own.
NovaLogic expects Comanche 4 to ship late in 2001, which probably means around Christmas. Given the success of the previous *Comanche* games—the company claims over two million units sold—this latest chopper game bears some watching. ●

NEWSBYTES

The Sims

Infogrames gets Terminated—Infogrames announced it has secured the license to produce games based on the *Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* motion pictures for current and next-generation console platforms as well as games for PC and Mac. The first game is anticipated to kick-off in the Spring of 2002 and is being developed by Infogrames. The action will take place in past and future worlds, integrating the vision of a post apocalyptic society and time-travel made famous by the Terminator films. Infogrames currently has four *Terminator* related projects underway. In other Inforgrames news, it appears they will dust off the Atari name (which they acquired along with Hasbro Interactive) to use on their top-of-the-line release such as *Unreal II*.... **Get a hot date**—If you're looking for a little virtual love, try *The Sims Hot Date Expansion*, the latest attempt by Electronic Arts to separate *Sims* fans from their real simoleans. The add-on features new characters, interests, romance objects, and an all-new Downtown area filled with restaurants, shops and parks. "Just like everyone, the Sims are looking for love," said Tim LeTourneau, Producer at EA's Maxis studio. "*Hot Date* allows Sims to experience the hilarious ups and downs of the dating game." Sims can now "flirt, play footsie, engage in a little tonsil hockey, or converse in Simlish about new and diverse interests." Next up: The Sims Get a Life....**UbiSoft gets Actualized**—Actualize and Ubi Soft have announced that they will release two ↘

Spell effects galore.

Recasting Spirit Covenant replenishes your mana and creates equipment, but it leaves you vulnerable.

Multiplayer Mutant Bashing

Nexon takes action role-playing online with Elemental Saga

by David Ryan Hunt

Far Eastern developer Nexon, known for its dedication to online role-playing games [see sidebar], has brought its latest endeavor, *Elemental Saga*, into full-scale beta testing. While on the surface it appears to be an updated version of Nexon's earlier, more hardcore *Dark Ages*, *Elemental Saga* targets a more mainstream audience with its massively multiplayer action-role-playing design.

Online + story?

As the story goes, the world was torn apart in a nuclear apocalypse near the end of the 21st century. Scattered and torn, mankind sought refuge in a place free from the devastation that plagued the planet's surface. This sparked the development of a city in the sky (creatively named Cloud). Once created, Cloud would become the home of the Pure, an elect group chosen to rule the masses from above. In truth, they would neglect the people below, dumping waste upon the Earth. Years passed, and Gaia, the life force of the planet, passed judgement on mankind, allowing Monsters to spew from the earth, intent on destroying humanity. Gaia decided, however, to give humans one last chance. She opened a gate to the spirit world, and energy flowed into the world and gave birth to hundreds of spirit magicians. These magicians would wage war against the demons that sought to destroy the earth. A maelstrom of violence held the planet firmly in its grasp, and you stand in the middle. As a spirit magician you must battle the demonic hordes and stand against the denizens of Cloud who perceive you as a threat.

Currently, there are already plans for years of plot development since the story will develop as the gameworld itself does. In contrast, most other online games do not have this type of active storyline. They tend to rely upon an expansive history and backstory. After the retail release, it will be more evident how this choice will play out.

Diablo-ified

Elemental Saga's designers intend to bring a unique blend of the simplicity and fun of action-RPGs to an expanded online community. By aiming for a more casual gaming experience, Nexon hopes to deliver for players who do not want to worry about learning the systems and rules before playing a game. There is almost no learning curve, and the experience is relatively similar to that in games like *Diablo*. Character creation consists of choosing one male or female avatar out of eight possible choices. The characters are based on the main four natural Elements

NEWSBYTES

new titles this fall. Developed by Warthog, creator of *Starlancer*, *Rally Championship Xtreme* is the sixth in the *Rally Championship* franchise. It will feature a realistic damage model, off-road capability, four rally venues (Arctic, USA, Safari, and British), over 24 tracks, and over 20 late-model cars as well as classics. Actualize is also debuting *The 3D Game Maker*. Under development by a team from Europress Software, which has launched similar products such as *The Games Factory*, *Klick and Play*, and *Art Attack*, this title enables you to create a variety of 3D games. Both of these products will be available in late September....

Icewind Dale

Free expansion for an expansion—Interplay has made a free expansion available for the *Heart of Winter* expansion to Black Isle's *Icewind Dale* role-playing game. The 72MB download (which can be found at www.interplay.com) requires *Icewind Dale* and *Heart of Winter*, and adds a new adventure, new monsters, and new settings to the popular role-playing game. After the web expansion is installed, a mysterious halfling introduces himself in the Whistling Gallows Inn in Lonelywood. He seeks a party of stalwart heroes for a quest to a place of great wonder, with treasures beyond the imagination. Should the party accept, they will be transported to a new place, far from the icy terrain of the Dale, finding themselves within the walls of a ruined castle in an unfamiliar land. It adds two main new areas to explore with a variety of sub levels for a total of 20 new levels, 20-40 new magic items,

(air, earth, fire and water). You then choose a color for your character, and that's it. The experience is extremely simple, but it may not appeal to hardcore gamers who like more customization possibilities.

When the game starts, you can summon a suit of armor and a weapon and begin killing monsters almost immediately. Gold and loot are automatically taken from your corpse when you die, so you do not have to worry about other players stealing your loot, and they cannot attack a creature if someone else has done significant damage to it already. Note that this does not currently prevent a high level player from blasting your kill at range before you deal sizeable damage. Killing stronger monsters often gives you spirit (mana) as well as gold and experience, so it is worth fighting difficult creatures.

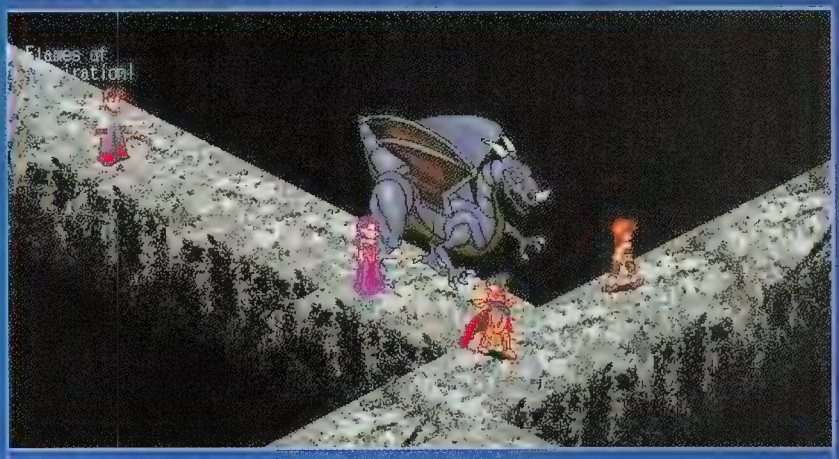
Combat is a point-and-click affair, with a hotkey bar on the bottom of the screen. By either hitting the number that corresponds to the hotkey or clicking it with the mouse, the hotkey is selected and can be activated with a right-click. You use everything from spells to healing items in this way, and there are multiple hotkey bars that you can quickly toggle through so there is never a problem readying the right spell. Quests are automatically generated when you arrive in certain areas or talk to non-player characters. The first quest you find involves killing several of one type of monster to learn Cure, and in fact, you acquire all the skills and spells by completing quests.

Individual monsters are rarely strong—instead *Elemental Saga* is based on the horde concept where you hack your way through a dozen monsters every minute or two. Even so, you can expect to die eventually. When that happens, some of your gold and expendable items will evaporate and you will lose experience and spirit. Nothing permanent is lost; nothing except your time, that is.

Elemental Saga will bring its simple and fast paced action experience to us near the end of the year. ●

Who's Nexon?

An independent developer dedicated to the creation of online games, Nexon snatched up its share of the North American multiplayer market in 1997 with its debut title, *Nexus: The Kingdom of the Winds*. Sporting a fairy tale-like gameworld, *Nexus* drew large numbers of players into its virtual role-playing society and it is still going strong today. In 1999, it released its second online game *Dark Ages*, a Celtic fantasy where players control the political system. Another title currently in development, *Shattered Galaxy*, has already achieved widespread attention. At the 2001 Independent Games Festival, it took home four of the six awards: the Seumas McNally Grand Prize, Best Game Design, Technical Excellence and the Audience Award. *Shattered Galaxy* allows you to choose a representative nation and battle aliens to increase resources and improve units. Ultimately, you will join the battle between nations, as players form groups and take enemy territory in a constantly shifting war.



Powerful characters battle a fierce beast in Dark Ages.

Since last year, Nexon's staff of five has quadrupled and twenty people now populate its Sunnyvale, CA offices. Nexon has something of a motto that describes its philosophy. "We define reality' is much more than a company tagline for us," explains Oman Miller, the Executive Manager and Producer at Nexon. "It represents the understanding that a small, relatively unknown (to date) game developer not only is capable of, but has and is creating some of the most engaging, dynamic and completely entertaining multiplayer experiences in cyberspace."

Nexon listens to players' feedback and uses it to improve the experience its games provide. For whatever reason, sometimes it is almost impossible to get the higher-ups in some companies to listen to the people playing their games. "Game developers who focus on massively multiplayer gaming need a close relationship with their gaming audience, or they will lose their attention and their interest," states Paul Philleo, the PR and Marketing Coordinator at Nexon.

Although Nexon is beginning to expand its marketing efforts, it has until now relied on word-of-mouth to find and hook new players. This has actually worked out quite well, as the players who like the games usually find friends who will also enjoy them. Word-of-mouth publicity also frees up the marketing dollar, allowing it to go to game development instead, which hopefully makes for a better product for all of us.

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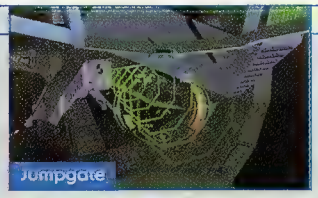

Jumpgate

one original new monster and four creatures from the *Baldur's Gate* games, new puzzles, traps, and more. It's targeted at players 11th - 18th level, and will also be adjusted for higher level parties via *Heart of Winter's* "Heart of Fury" mode....**Red-hot piracy numbers**—According to a report issued by the Business Software Alliance, 37% of all programs used in businesses worldwide are illegal copies. They claim the worldwide dollar losses to software makers is $11.75 billion....**3DO jumps Jumpgate**—3DO has reached an agreement with NetDevil to publish its massively multiplayer space simulation *Jumpgate*. The game is a *Privateer* or *Elite* style game where you engage in ship-to-ship combat, trading, smuggling, research and more. Use money to upgrade your ship and hire new pilots to command a fleet. The game is now in beta and is scheduled for release near the end of 2001...**More games need cannibalism**—A game based on this year's controversial hit film *Hannibal* is in development. The premise: you play FBI Agent Clarise Starling who tries to track down the infamous killer Hannibal Lecter. Why oh why isn't it a strategy game, with you as Lecter managing a steady flow of warm bodies to fulfill your culinary desires... think of the possibilities. Or not....**American McGee's Carbon 6**—American McGee, former id level designer and creator of *American McGee's Alice* (not to be confused with any other *Alice*), has started a new company called Carbon 6 with fellow ex id

That Tingling Sensation

Activision gets its spider sense working with Spider-Man

by Steve Bauman

Few comic book characters have been well represented on any gaming platform. Last year, however, *Tony Hawk* creator Neversoft did a terrific job bringing Spider-Man to its eponymously named PlayStation game (and eventually the Dreamcast, Nintendo 64, and Gameboy). While the PlayStation gets a full sequel this year, PC gamers get a version of the original that, after spending some time with a nearly complete version, appears to retain the same excellent gameplay as the source game.

Of course PC gamers have slightly different expectations than their console brethren. While the third-person 3D action genre is common to all platforms, make no mistake that *Spider-Man* is a pure console game, with save points and controls best suited to a gamepad. You'll take on a variety of villains (from Scorpion, Venom, and Rhino to various lizard men and cops), explore the skyscrapers and sewers of New York City, and bump into all sorts of familiar characters. You have a full arsenal of powers at your disposal, including your trusty web shooters, other web projectiles, various sonic devices, that spider sense, and what the hell, you can throw furniture at people.

Bite your tongue!

So are there low-flying Zeppelins overhead for Spidey to attach to when moving between buildings?

Exploring the levels is interesting as the game moves between outdoor, skyscraper-to-skyscraper web swinging battles (while being attacked from above by the police, and on the ground from various henchmen) and indoor missions. Spidey can crawl on any surface (when you're on the ceiling it becomes transparent so you can see what's going on), which certainly makes for interesting gameplay, though the game's camera system can occasionally prove problematic. You can shoot webs at people to trap them, then freely punch or kick 'em in the groin.

Graphically the game looks quite good, and while the environments themselves are somewhat sparse and dull, the individual characters (particularly Spidey) are well animated and quite colorful. The game's cut scenes, narrated by Spider-Man's creator Stan Lee, are pretty good.

Fans of the comic book finally have something to look forward to with this game, and with Sam Raimi's movie (with Tobey Maguire as Spidey) opening early next year, expect this frenzy of arachnid activity to continue into the near future. ●

NEWSBYTES

Internal Pain

↘ Software employee Dave Taylor. The company will not only develop games but also create movies and other tie-in products around those properties....**Incoming Forces announced**—For fans of the original (both of you), Interplay has announced a sequel to *Incoming*, *Incoming Forces*, also developed by Rage. It's slated to ship by the end of 2001. The action game features 10 different craft, with battles on 3D terrain from four different planets. Incoming Forces will have a single-player campaign as well as team and deathmatch-style multiplayer action. **What next, ruptured spleen?**—Apparently all good names for games are taken as Slovakian developer Fantasy Studio has announced a new 3D action game called *Internal Pain*. Choose from four races and explore 39 levels. Expect multiplayer cooperative and deathmatch modes. A release date has not been announced for the game....**No One Programs Forever**—Monolith has released the source code for our 2000 "Game of the Year" *No One Lives Forever*. It's available at the official website www.theoperative.com. "I recognize the importance of the online community and what it means to the continued success of a gaming franchise," said Chris Miller, producer for Fox Interactive. "After hearing the continued request for source code on the newsgroups, Monolith and Fox got together to give the fans exactly what they are looking for." ●

The Big Bang Theory
At this very second
the universe
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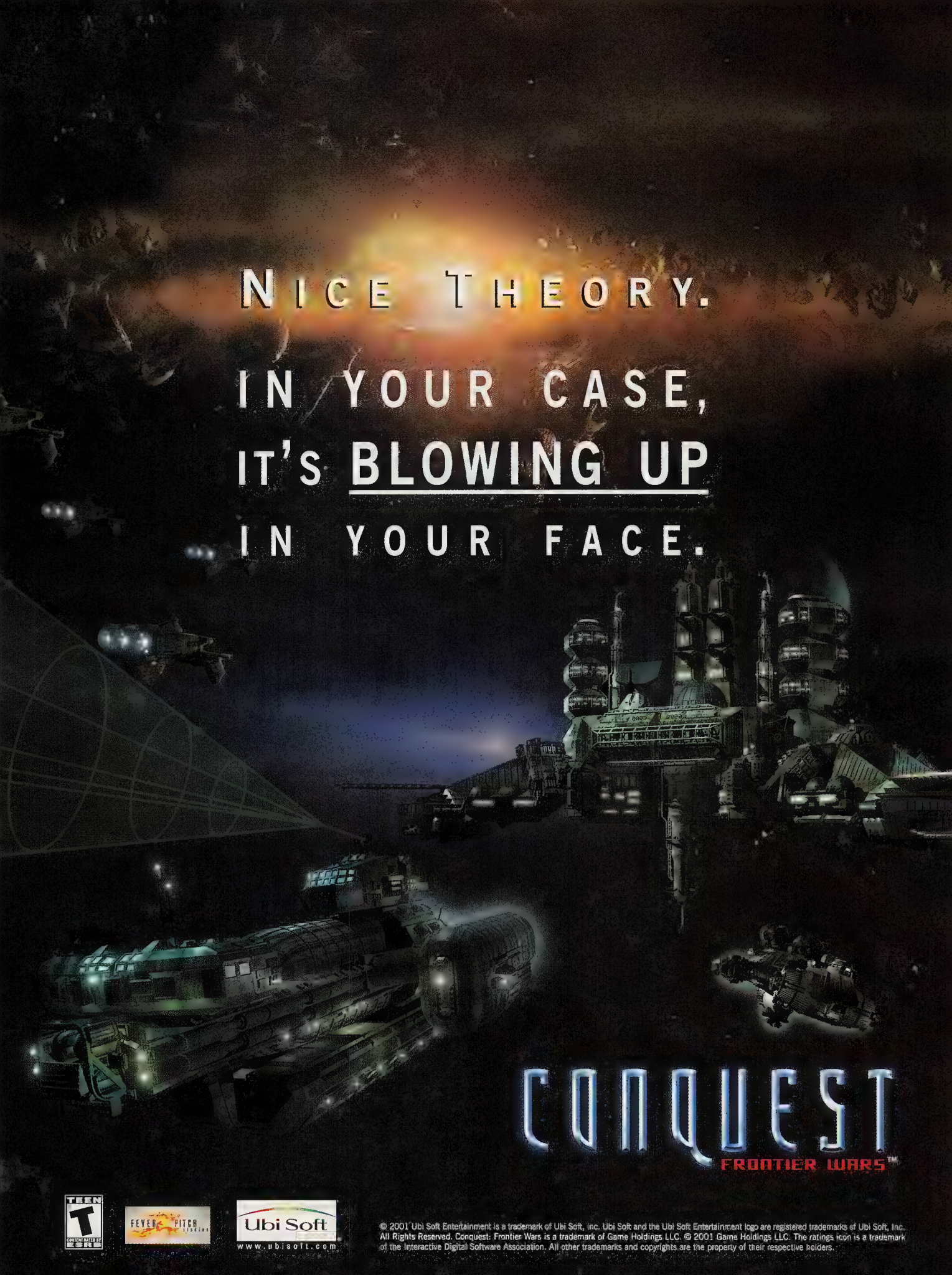

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The CRENELLATED KEEPER

Stronghold gives castle lovers a double-edged sword

by Cindy Yans

We think of most buildings as having a single purpose: home, hospital, cathedral, grocery, and the like, with the notable exceptions of more modern combo-structures such as the dual-purpose bowling alley/laundromat. The Medieval castle, depending upon the status of its main inhabitant, served as many things: a military base, a seat of government, a court, a trade center, and a stronghold for the surrounding region. It could be any or all of these things, but it was most singularly the private residence of its owner, his family, dependents, and courtiers. Firefly Studios, via publisher Gathering of Developers, is packaging all of the elements of the castle phenomenon into its debut title, a simulation/real-time strategy game aptly titled *Stronghold*.

From punk and pool to Firefly

When not appearing in orange T-shirts at international expositions, the folks from Firefly hail from London, England. Formed in August 1999 by Simon Bradbury, Eric Ouellette, and David Lester, the company brings a lot of experience to the development table.

20 years ago, Bradbury was in a punk band belting out songs and getting in people's faces. Making the natural progression from punk rocker to programmer, he spent 17 years solo-programming games. In his eight years with Impressions Software he worked on the *Caesar* and *Lords of the Realm* series. His first game, *Elf*, arrived in 1985. He then went on to do *The Man from the Council*, *Sidewinder II Amiga*, *Kenny Dalgleish Soccer Manager III*, *Legends of the Lost*, *Champions*, *Athletics*, *Ancient Games*, *Striker No. 9*, *Merchant Colony*, *Discovery*, *Air Force Commander*, *Caesar*, *Lords of the Realm*, *Global Domination*, *Caesar II*, *Lords of the Realm II*, and *Caesar III*.

Ouellette, on the other hand, was born into gaming. As a crackerjack pool player at the age of one, his path was clear. Upon graduating from the University of Connecticut with a degree in Economics and Finance, he leapt directly into that bastion of entry-level industry positions, Game Tester, at Impressions Software. During his seven years there, he worked on titles such as *Air Force Commander*, *Air Bucks*, *Discovery*, *When Two Worlds War*, *Global Domination*, *Edward Grabowski's The Blue and The Grey*, *Pharaoh*, and the *Caesar* and *Lords of the Realm* series. Now that is history, and it seems that the rest is history as well.

(clockwise from top left) The wildlife model in Stronghold is extremely robust: higher difficulty levels will let you over-hunt — You can light oil on fire to create flaming obstacles for your opponents — Laddermen climb the walls in a full frontal siege attack.

What is Stronghold?

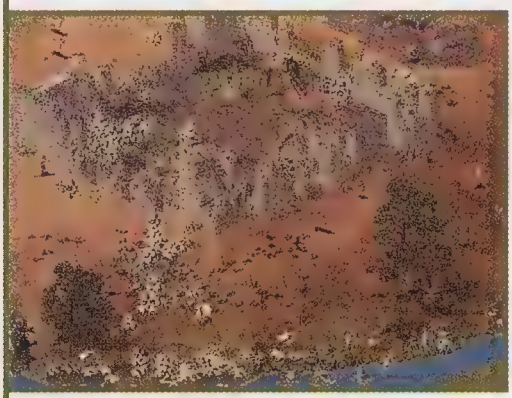
With a keen interest in medieval history, the Firefly developers wanted to bring their *Lords of the Realm* expertise to full real-time. *Stronghold* is a cross between city builders such as *Caesar III* and real-time strategy games like *Age of Empires*. Set in medieval Europe, the game challenges you to establish settlements, build and manage castles, and engage in siege warfare.

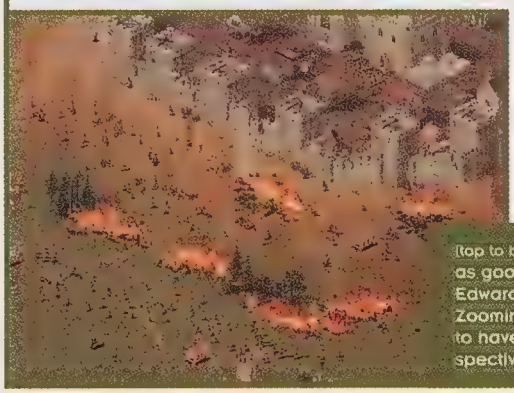
Bradbury and Oulette agree that this is the game they've wanted to make for a very long time. "It takes the city building elements we enjoyed from working on the *Caesar* series and combines that with strong medieval real-time combat from the likes of *Age of Empires*," says Bradford. "The main inspiration behind *Stronghold* is taking a combination of what we feel are the best elements from both of these types of games."

The game is set between the 11th and 14th centuries and takes you through the evolution of castles beginning with wooden palisades to Norman keeps to Edwardian stone edifices. In the US and UK, you will be playing England, but a regionalized design will allow players in France to play, well, France. There is a single-player campaign consisting of 20 linear story-based missions, an eight-person multiplayer game, and a full-featured map and scenario editor.

In the single-player game, treacherous upstart feudal lords have been creating havoc in the country, tearing it apart, and making things generally unpleasant. It's up to you as the King's right hand man to reunite it by attacking their lands and their castles. Four Barons are in control [see sidebar] and you must defeat them one by one.

(top to bottom) While there will not be a strong troop formation element, you can still have purposeful unit arrangement. — A prosperous lord will be able to provide amenities such as gardens, maypoles and castle banners. — A cutaway view shows a granary full of meat in this view of the working economy.





(top to bottom) This castle is not in as good a shape as its Edwardian big brothers. — Zooming in and out allows you to have a better overall perspective.

But wait, there's more—much more

Probably the most compelling reason to look forward to this game is the number of ways you can approach it. In addition to the large single-player campaign, there is a standalone map game that you can approach in four different ways. A build-only option puts you in sandbox mode in which you can take any existing map (including those you have created or acquired) and start from scratch to build and manage any style of castle you wish. You can set your own goals here, such as building the most efficient, beautiful, or even cruelest castle (complete with gallows and stockades).

The non-combat standalone game provides you with any number of economic goals such as "collect 5000 food, gold, wenches," etc. Here you will enter a specific terrain and try to create circumstances that are the most advantageous to success.

Siege and invasion modes give you a set of pre-built historic castles to play [see page 47]. You can choose to play offensively or defensively, and then begin with a set amount of resources. In these modes you'll encounter plenty of opposition, and depending upon your earlier choice, either fortify your stronghold to ward off the invaders, or expand your position and take over their castle.

All modes will have four difficulty levels, and they are toying with the idea of adding an auto-difficulty level where the AI will attempt to tailor the experience to the success or failure of the player on the fly to create an optimal balance.

The robust map and scenario editor is, as is usual these days, the one that the developers use to create their own missions.

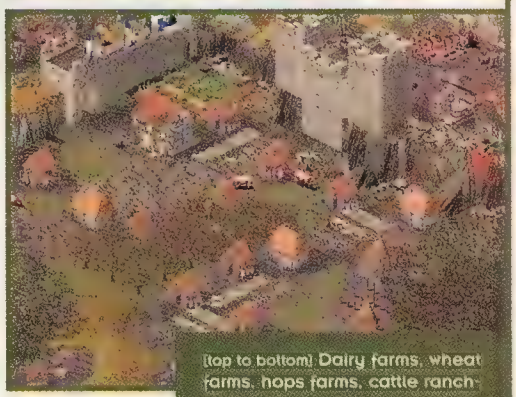
There is a wide variety of terrain laying options and the building system is similar to a large Lego set, you can drag walls and make them any thickness, build different types of towers and keeps, place stairs, crenulated walls, gatehouses, moats, and more.

It is very intricate, but seems quite accessible to the average player, and players who are accustomed to this sort of thing will probably be able to come up with some pretty professional-level results.

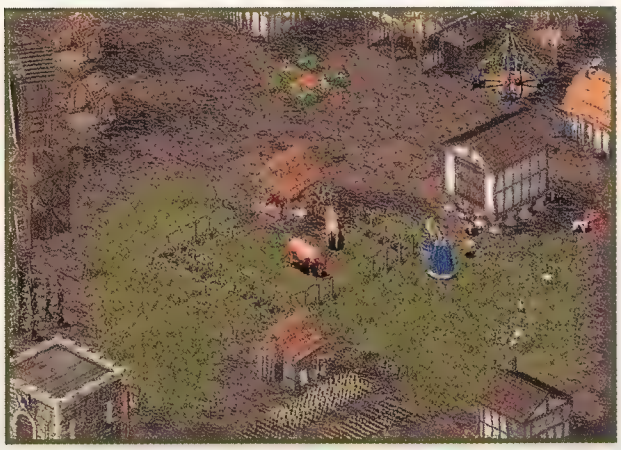
Do you pop out at parties? Are you unpoopular?

The core to success in *Stronghold* lies in your popularity as lord of the castle. The higher your popularity, the more people will come to the castle, and the larger your castle's population, the more its potential for prosperity, allowing you to reach both combat and non-combat goals. If your popularity lowers significantly, people will leave the castle, abandoning their jobs, and finding work someplace else.

Popularity is "scored" as an average of various statistics such as food supply, tax rate, accessibility to religion, crowding, and more. Bradbury illustrates, "How well are you feeding your people? Are you starving them on very little food or giving them extra rations? How many food types are you feeding them? Are you feeding the people just wheat, or apples and cheese as well? How high is the tax rate? Is there disease in the castle? Have you built enough churches or given out free ale lately?" All of these are considerations in keeping your people happy. You can also add perks such as scenic gardens and nifty maypoles. If you wish to play a cruel lord and gain loyalty through a broad implementation of torture devices, you'll be able to keep the population on your side out of fear. In shades of *Black & White*, the people will hate you, but worship you just the same.



[top to bottom] Dairy farms, wheat farms, hops farms, cattle ranches and apple orchards are the major sources of food supply. — Cattle serve as food as well as being the main source of leather armor.



[top to bottom] The game's visual style is extremely engaging, with peasants bustling around, and a hunting dog sniffing carcasses. — Fearful peasants huddle by the fire. — The more churches you have, the more blessed your population. This is a factor in popularity.

As you gain popularity, you'll have at your fingertips a wide variety of resources to expand your castle and build up military forces. The five basic resources upon which all the others depend are the natural wood, iron, pitch and stone, and gold. With these building blocks, everything else you need can be manufactured in some way. Various buildings provide work environments for the castle populace, and they in turn produce secondary resources such as food, drink, armor, and weapons, all of which can be sold for gold to pay wages to military units [see sidebar, "The Brewer, the Baker, the Siege Engine Maker"]. Once you have produced a barracks and enough gold, weapons, and armor to accommodate military forces, normal citizens will recruit themselves.

When you're not alone

While the single-player game is more focused on the sim style of play, multiplayer will lean a bit more toward the action-oriented real-time strategy style we're most used to. "Multiplayer is quite a different game," describes Ouelette, "There is the whole sim economy you have to learn to manage, so it gives you quite a different feel when you have to feed people and continue to keep your popularity high so you can get more people to turn into military units, rather than having to 'build' them."

With LAN and Internet play, the multiplayer game will allow the host to select from a richer list of options than many other games. Which castle type you choose to start with determines the number of possible resources you can provide. Whatever you choose, you will have the option to set High, Medium, or Low resources and leave it at that, or if you're a bit pickier, to determine *exactly* the number and type of units, weapons, food, building supplies, etc. that you wish to allocate. You can also determine the starting popularity level, whether or not to permit trading of resources (and which resources), set teams and alliances, victory conditions, and of course, choose a starting map.

Selecting an earlier type of castle will

(left to right) The ins and outs of the Motte & Bailey fortress structure attack.

probably result in a longer game since more meager resources will increase the time between fortification and siege. However you begin, though, when your king dies, you've lost. But as in most real-time strategy games, the balance of power will generally fall toward the one who can control the most resources.

Helping your allies with resources is not a matter of a simple interface-driven reply to the supplication, "Wood, please." Instead you can send out carts to them, but the carts are subject to sabotage and misfortune on the way.

Cow overboard

In medieval times, there were three basic ways of gaining forced entry into a castle. You could knock down the walls, climb over them, or tunnel under them. Firefly has implemented all three of these methods in its approach to siege combat.

You will have full control over all military units and the ability to speed up or slow down the rate of time passage, but the developers are not planning any elaborate formation or waypoint system, as about 80% of the combat will be defensive. They are incorporating many warfare elements that were unique to the period, such as storming laddermen, moats, tunneling, boil-

THE BREWER, THE BAKER, THE SIEGE ENGINE MAKER

The nuts and bolts of the *Stronghold* castle, army, and economy

While the game does not have an extraordinary number of units, the ones they do have are essential to the maintenance of the castle, and to the ins and outs of siege warfare. Here's a look at some of them.

Brewer

Fetches the hops, brews and delivers the ale.
She drinks a little too much of her own produce however, and has never received an offer of marriage.

Blacksmith

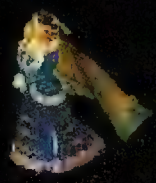
Collects iron from the store and uses it to forge swords or maces at your command. A short tempered and ill-humored fellow whose black mood is lightened only by his love of his pet rabbit.

Poleturner

Collects wood from the wood pile and creates either spears or pikes for your armory.

Lord

He who you must defend!
A heroic fighter, absolutely deadly with his massive two-handed sword. Should he fall in combat however, the castle is lost.



Lady

She who you would lay down your life for (at least that's what she says). A little bossy but with the good of the castle at heart, she works hard at putting up with the squalid conditions she has been force to live in ever since her dad sold her to his lordship.

Jester

The life and soul of the castle, his job is to entertain the citizens or die. Most people find his antics amusing, but not all, in fact some people find him downright…irritating. The tanner, for one, has threatened to dispatch him if he waves his tickling stick at her just one more time.

Woodcutter

Chops down trees and when he has sawn up enough logs, delivers timber to your stockpile. Trees will regrow if you leave behind the saplings
A proud and confident fellow, a lot of the villagers think him vain.

Armorer

Collects iron ingots from the stockpile, creates and delivers armor to the armory, allowing you to train swordsmen and knights.
An old soldier, now cleverly earning his living as a craftsman.
A well-respected figure in the village.

Archer

The mainstay of your army (some would say), a long firing range and a fast reload combined with ease of production make archers an oft seen sight in and around castle sieges. He is a good and loyal soldier, generally liked by all in the castle

Engineer

The engineer is the core character to all siege engine maintenance. An engineer is required to build, deploy, and manage siege engines on a one to one basis. He may not repair them or, in some cases, even move them, but is required to operate them. He also manages the flaming oil operation.

ing oil, trebuchets, killing pits, etc. While some people think that launching cows over castle wall is straight out of Monty Python, it was an actual military tactic to launch decaying carcasses (of all kinds) in order to cause disease within the opposition's walls. This is implemented here in its full glory as cows fly over the wall, splat, and burst into plague-bearing steam. The only defense against this tactic is to have your apothecary run around spraying the equivalent of medieval Lysol in order to cure the ailing population.

All combat and construction happens on the same map in real time. Combat and some construction can be concurrent, but gameplay will tend towards players building up their castles, fighting a siege then having a short break during which they can rebuild or add defenses and manage their economy before the next attack arrives.

What're you looking at?

As if diverse options and multiple gameplay modes were not enough, Firefly has the audacity to think the product has to look good as well. Even in the early build of the game used for this article, the visual style is quite attractive, with sharp 2D isometric graphics with a remarkable 3D feel. The map is rotatable with a zoom feature, and scalable graphics.

A sim at heart, *Stronghold* has incredibly visual resource collection. For example, a woodcutter fells a tree that then falls down. Next, he cuts up the tree into logs and delivers them to his hut. Next he saws the logs into planks and finally carries them to the storehouse in the castle. This is a simple example of all the resource chains in the game. It is visually very rich, but the only action you have to worry about is initially placing the woodcutter's hut. The game manages the rest. The production buildings have a cutaway view so you can run your mouse over them to see what's going on inside.

As for estimating the extent of your holdings, you don't need a resource screen to see the numbers (although they do provide one). Instead, you can look at the stockpiles and you'll see the approximate level of your resources. "We spent ages on how to do that," said Ouelette. "We really wanted to make it super visual. You don't really care if you have 87 blocks of wood, you just say, 'OK, do I have a lot of wood, or do I have a little bit of wood?'" And again, if you do want the specifics, there are statistical screens that show all of your unit, armor, food, gold, and natural resource assets.

Cattle serve as food as well as being the main source of leather armor

Best of all, though, is the animation. A 70-something woman who has barely ever touched a computer (let's call her "Mom") spent literally hours just looking at the game in its real-time progression. Watching *her* watch *it* was extraordinary. She exclaimed over and over again things like, "I can't believe this... how pret-

Swordsmen

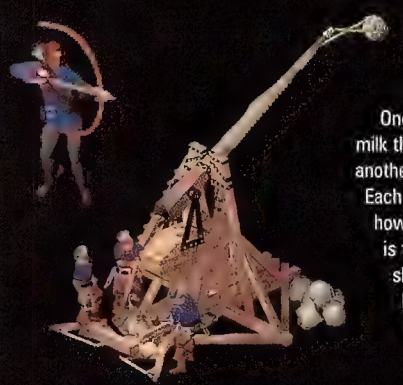
A heavily armored fighting machine, very hard to get into the castle as they are slow, they won't scale walls or fill in moats, but when they do get in they are even harder to get out! A loyal and really nice guy, a little bit haughty, and at least one arrow short of a quiver, but once you give him a task he sticks to it through thick and thin.

Pikemen

The supreme defensive unit. Placed strategically on the battlements, they can hold of attackers for a long time, allowing your tower based missile Troops to rain down on them. A tough and determined and well-disciplined soldier, he knows that glory is not for him. His size and stamina however, mean that he is given plenty of respect in the local inn.

Crossbowmen

Although slower to reload and with a shorter range than archers, this soldier is far more deadly and his powerful crossbow is much more effective against heavily armored troops. A professional soldier, too professional, for some, he takes his training far too far. People joke that he would probably shoot his own mother if his captain told him to. A nervy character, not particularly liked in town.



Trebuchet

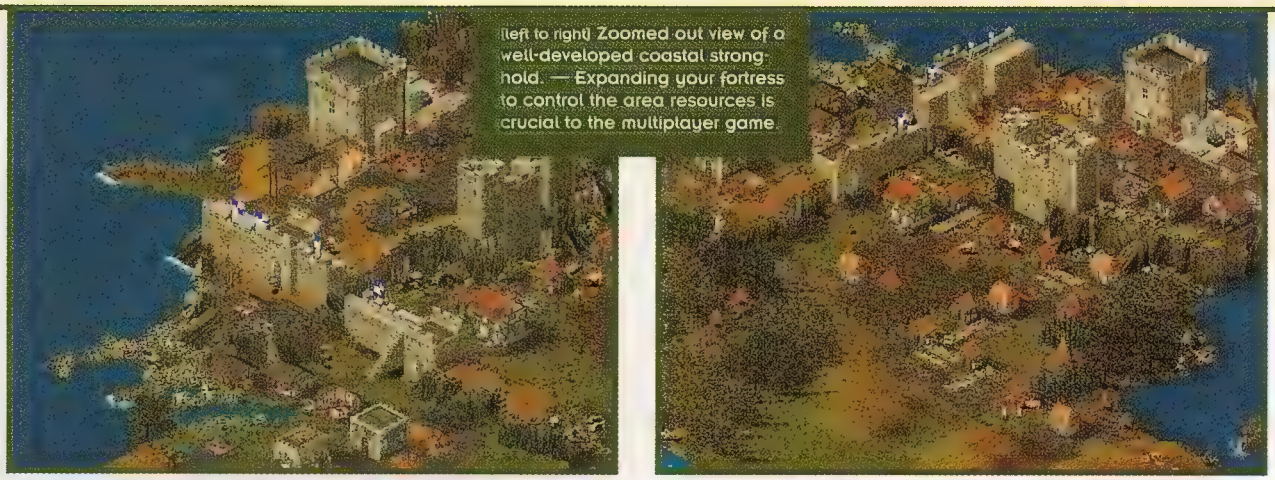
The biggest piece of wooden machinery in your arsenal. With a great range and "wall dismantling" power the only real defense against these beasts is to sneak out of the castle destroy them and then rush back in again.

Balista

One of many deadly pieces of castle equipment you employ to keep the invaders out. All castle defense equipment (boiling oil, mangonels, etc.) requires highly trained and expensive engineers. You must decide what they operate, the ballista is useful whilst the enemy is still at some distance but less so once they are within. The best weapon against the incoming troops' portable shields.

Drover

Placing a dairy farm attracts a drover who breeds the cows. Once your herd is big enough he will milk the cows to make cheese, just another way of feeding your people. Each food source has its drawbacks however and the curse of the drover is the tanner who takes and slaughters his cows to tan their hides for armor, which depresses him immensely. ●



(left to right) Zoomed out view of a well-developed coastal stronghold. — Expanding your fortress to control the area resources is crucial to the multiplayer game.

ty!" and "Look at that chicken!" and "Are those *rabbits*?" and "Where is that lady going?" It is a feast to behold, and it is obvious that attention to detail and a lot of work on the textures (many of which Ouelette insists aren't even close to final) are going to make for an incredibly vivid simulation with moving water, swaying trees, all manner of wildlife, and individual townspeople with names, task-descriptions, incidental dialogue, and dynamically changing apparel and equipment.

It all hangs in the balance

As usual, no matter how promising a product looks, the proof will be in the game's final integrity and balance. There aren't tons and tons of different units and weapons here, and that probably bodes well for the bottom-line success of balancing. Even though Firefly is offering a lot of game components, the relative simplicity of the minutia points to the probability that the team has not over-challenged itself.

Another factor that points to success is that no matter how much research that's gone into the product, none of the developers is wed to a sense of historical accuracy that will overwhelm the fun factor. For instance, the campaign spans four centuries, and to ensure that you get the most enjoyable, comprehensive experience, your character will be there for all four. As a colleague noted, "You're gonna be really, really, old by the end of this game." But if Firefly pulls this off, even if you get old, it's a cinch that the game will not. ●

LORDS OF THE FIREFLIES

The Bad Guys of Stronghold

Here is some information based on Firefly's take on its four evil barons. In the single-player campaign, you'll fight them in order, and they may try to ally with you, but beware. Each is increasingly trickier then the last and they will sometimes come to each other's aid instead. You'll see their portraits and hear from them intermittently during gameplay by way of between-game updates, in-game messages, and actions that take place on the map.

Just turned twenty, **The Rat** (a.k.a. Duc de Puce) is the scrawniest of enemies to cross your path. He suffers from an acute acne problem and his huge nose and seemingly glued-back pointed ears along with unkempt tufts of hair and large front teeth make him look gaunt and give him his ratty appearance.

The Rat is a highly-strung character with little self-confidence and no capacity to hide this fact. His general jittery nature sometimes gives way to short bursts of spasmodic twitching when he speaks. To top it all off, the Rat is a poor judge of character making him easy prey for anyone trying to lure the gullible fool into a trap.

The Snake (a/k/a Duc Beauregard) was once governor of some of the richest provinces in the homeland where he made an extremely fruitful but less than honorable living from under declaring the taxes collected from his people. The king was eventually made aware of this and decided to have him exiled to Britain in order to keep him at arms length while still making use of his talents.

Undaunted and already back to his old tricks, the Snake has his greasy hands in the Rat's back pocket, draining his coffers with help from the corrupt tax officials initially sent over to give him aid. Overall he is a master of the double-cross and will use every dirty trick in the book to stab friends and enemies alike in the back.

When **The Pig** (a/k/a Duc Truffe) was born, it is rumored he looked so hideous that his parents abandoned him in the street.

He is a big fat slobbering mess of a man and by far the least attractive enemy you will encounter. His obesity is so out of hand that he can no longer fully support his own weight and has to walk hunched forwards but he usually relies on his shire horse "Snowy" whose previous role was to transport slabs of rock up and down mountains. As a whole The Pig is a greedy leader who places unreasonable taxes on his people.

The Wolf (a/k/a Duc Volpe) has a past that is shrouded in mystery and what is known of his history is mainly patched together from stories and unreliable rumors alone. This aside, it is believed that both of his parents died from natural causes in close succession shortly after his eighteenth birthday.

Often allied with The Pig, The Wolf is built from pure muscle, undoubtedly making him the strongest of the foes you will meet. He is the cold and calculating mastermind behind the entire saga, and even though he manages to keep his cool in the face of adversity, underneath, the cogs never stop whirring as he thinks up the most cunning way to outsmart the opposition. He is the most efficient as well as the cruellest of leaders rumored to kill even his most loyal of his staff that step out of line and this causes people under his rule to respect him through sheer terror. ●

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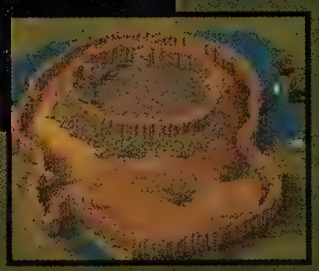
Firefly plans to include a number of stand-alone scenarios in the final game based on actual historical castles. Ever wonder what it might be like to defend Leeds Castle in England, or perhaps Eisenach Stozenfels on the Rhine, or Dunnottar in Scottland? As with the rest of the game, Firefly has put an impressive amount of research into ensuring that these historically inspired castles are fair representations of their real-life counterparts.

Windsor

Type: Wood (Motte & Bailey)
Location: England

Windsor castle in its stone form is one of the largest castles in England. In about 1070, William the Conqueror built the first castle on this site. It was a "motte and bailey" castle, but very little information remains about this version. Historically, a motte is an enditched mound, usually artificial, that supported the strongpoint that overlooks the bailey or enclosed courtyard below. The lord lived within the motte, while the baileys held stables and other outbuildings. As these structures were constructed from wood, they were vulnerable to fire. It was often difficult for the enemy to get close enough to start or maintain a blaze long enough to burn through the heavy logs.

"We wanted to show Windsor castle in its earliest form, which was the motte and bailey," explains Executive Producer Eric Ouellette. "It was the typical castle type of Europe prior to the 11th century."



Monteriggioni

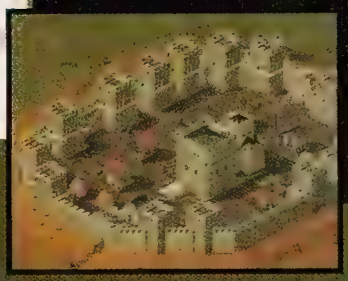
Type: Stone
Location: Italy

Monteriggioni is without a doubt one of the most classical and best-known Italian walled towns. The walls, which are mostly intact today, cover a length of 570 meters and are alternated by 14 towers and two gates.

The hill on which Monteriggioni is built is a natural part of the landscape. It has a close resemblance to the artificial hills used for the motte and bailey castles. The walls follow the ground's curves.

The Senesis built the town in the years 1213 through 1219 on a hillock at dominion and overlooking of the Cassia Road. Its ideal position can control both the Elsa and the Staggia Valleys. Monteriggioni is interesting in the fact it contains a whole town within its walls, making the structure very large. Yet it was still well defended. Italy was made of small independent states, often based around fortified towns.

"Monteriggioni was selected because the construction system in *Stronghold* will support building a stand-alone castle or walled city," says Ouellette. "The system is much like a Lego set, giving the player a huge amount of flexibility."



Harlech

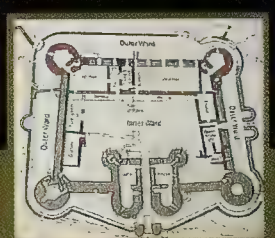
Type: Stone
Location: Wales (English Castle)

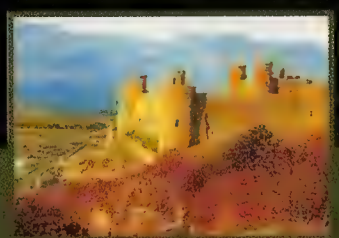
Harlech was one of several castles created during the second campaign of King Edward I in north Wales. These castles, known as the "iron ring," stretched from Flint around to Aberystwyth. They were built to prevent the region from ever again becoming a focal point of insurrection. King Edward's forces arrived at Harlech in April 1283, and construction began almost immediately. Over the next six years, an army of masons, quarries, labourers and other craftsmen worked on the existing structure. At its height, workers numbered near 950 men. By 1290 the castle was nearly completed at a cost of £9000, which is around a million pounds in today's money.

The final result was a perfectly concentric castle, with one line of defence enclosed by another. Stone walls protected the landward side, and a cliff face protected the seaward side, leaving only the east face vulnerable to attack. On this east side the massive gatehouse was constructed with a series of heavy doors, narrow passages and three portcullises.

Another great defensive feature about this castle is a "way from the sea," a gated and fortified stairway plunging almost 200 ft down to the foot of the castle rock. Once, this gave access to supplies from the sea, but the tide level has since receded, leaving Harlech somewhat isolated upon its rock. Harlech is now classed as a World Heritage site.

"We choose this castle, because of its amazing defensive capabilities," says Ouellette. "With the history behind this castle and the fact it was part of the 'iron ring' of castles in Wales is another reason we choose it. Build and try to stop the Welsh rebelling again!" ●





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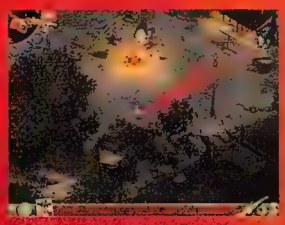

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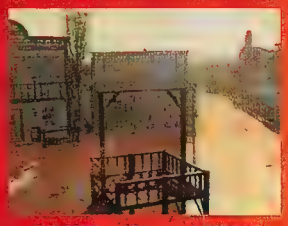

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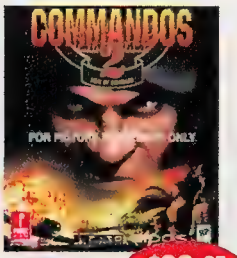

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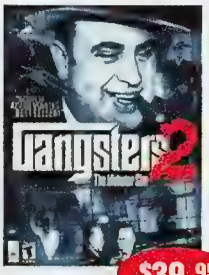

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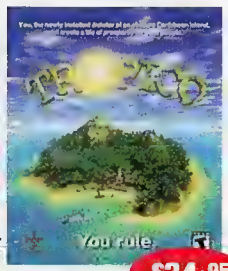

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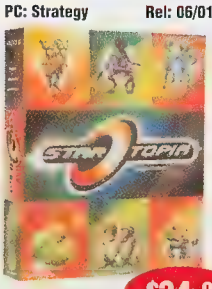

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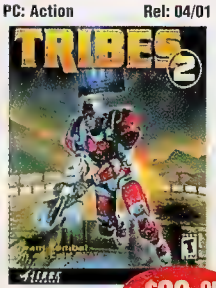

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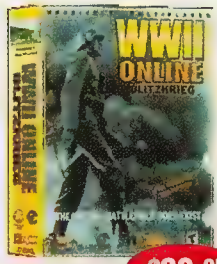

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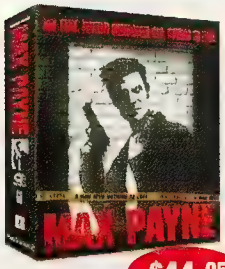

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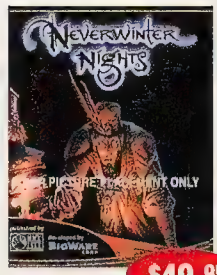

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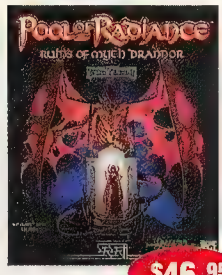

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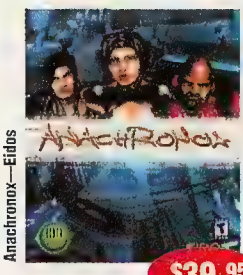

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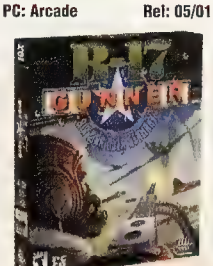

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Breaking Out of the Mold

Westwood gets personal with its Command & Conquer shooter Renegade

by Robert Mayer

A renegade is a rebel, someone who breaks away from accepted norms and expectations. In Westwood's case, *Renegade* is an apt name for its first real 3D shooter. While thematically rooted in the original *Command & Conquer*'s strategy universe, the action game is a radical departure from the company's "Refine & Republish" norm. And like all rebellions, this one carries its own share of risks.

After a string of commercial successes in the real-time strategy realm, you might wonder why Westwood would consider rocking the boat with an entry into the relatively crowded shooter market, an arena known for its rabid and often unforgiving fans. Producer Dan Cermak says that the idea for the game dates back to when the company was working on the original *Command & Conquer*. At that time, the team was struck by the idea, "Wouldn't it be great to be down there in the action, experiencing the battle firsthand?" Cermak explains, "The popularity of the Commando unit really solidified it for us. In *C&C*, he was only a few pixels tall, but he made a huge impression with his attitude and his power." With a timeline in parallel with the original *Command & Conquer*, *Renegade* takes you through the course of the war between GDI and Nod chronicled in the original real-time strategy game, culminating with the destruction of Kane's temple by the Ion Cannon. This time, though, *you'll* be placing the beacon that calls down the final retribution.

In the original game, the United Nations Global Defense Initiative (GDI) battled the Brotherhood of Nod, a terrorist organization bent on world domination. This was a struggle complicated by the discovery of Tiberium, a substance with powerful and dangerous capabilities. *Command & Conquer* told the story of the first war for control of Tiberium, and the consequences that followed. The Commando has proven one of the most popular of all the original game's units. Powerful, flexible, and undeniably cool, the Commando reigned supreme in Westwood's pantheon, at least until the advent of *Red Alert*'s Tanya. In the game, you'll play Captain Nick "Havoc" Parker, whose career with GDI is marked by a tendency to ignore orders and attempts at enforcing cooperation. As the eponymous renegade, Parker sets out on a series of missions over 11 large indoor and outdoor environments. Leaving the rest of the Commando force behind (the "Dead Six," although there are only four left at the game's start), you'll face every sort of obstacle Nod can throw at you, including a beautiful and traitorous ex-Commando.

You won't be entirely alone, though. You'll benefit from the assistance of other GDI troops, including individuals like Gunner, who accompanies you on at least one mission, and generic reinforcements who will arrive when you complete certain mission objectives. You'll have the benefit of local assistance, too, as civilian fighters in some missions will be more than happy to die for the cause. Westwood is making every attempt to put you smack dab in the middle of a true *C&C* battle, so you can expect to see lots of firefights between forces not directly related to your own mission. You may be a hotshot Commando, but you're just one part of the entire war.

...the sky darkens, the wind picks up, rain begins to fall, and then the Ion Cannon fires...

[clockwise from upper left] With Gunner at your side, you're ready to take on the world. — Renegade's dynamic environment means nothing is certain, not even air support. — This Nod trooper is a mean man. — Have chaingun, will travel.

Tools of the trade

So you can fight the war better, *Renegade* will offer fully configurable controls, and Cermak hopes for a configurable HUD as well. You get the choice between first and third person views, except when driving a vehicle; then, third person is mandatory. In practice, the standard first person view works so well you'll find little reason to leave it. Even in its unfinished state the game feels like a shooter should, with precise movement, responsive controls, and accurate aiming. To accommodate the expected interest among the *C&C*-adept but shooter impaired, Westwood will offer some assists, like color-coded target brackets to help with aiming.

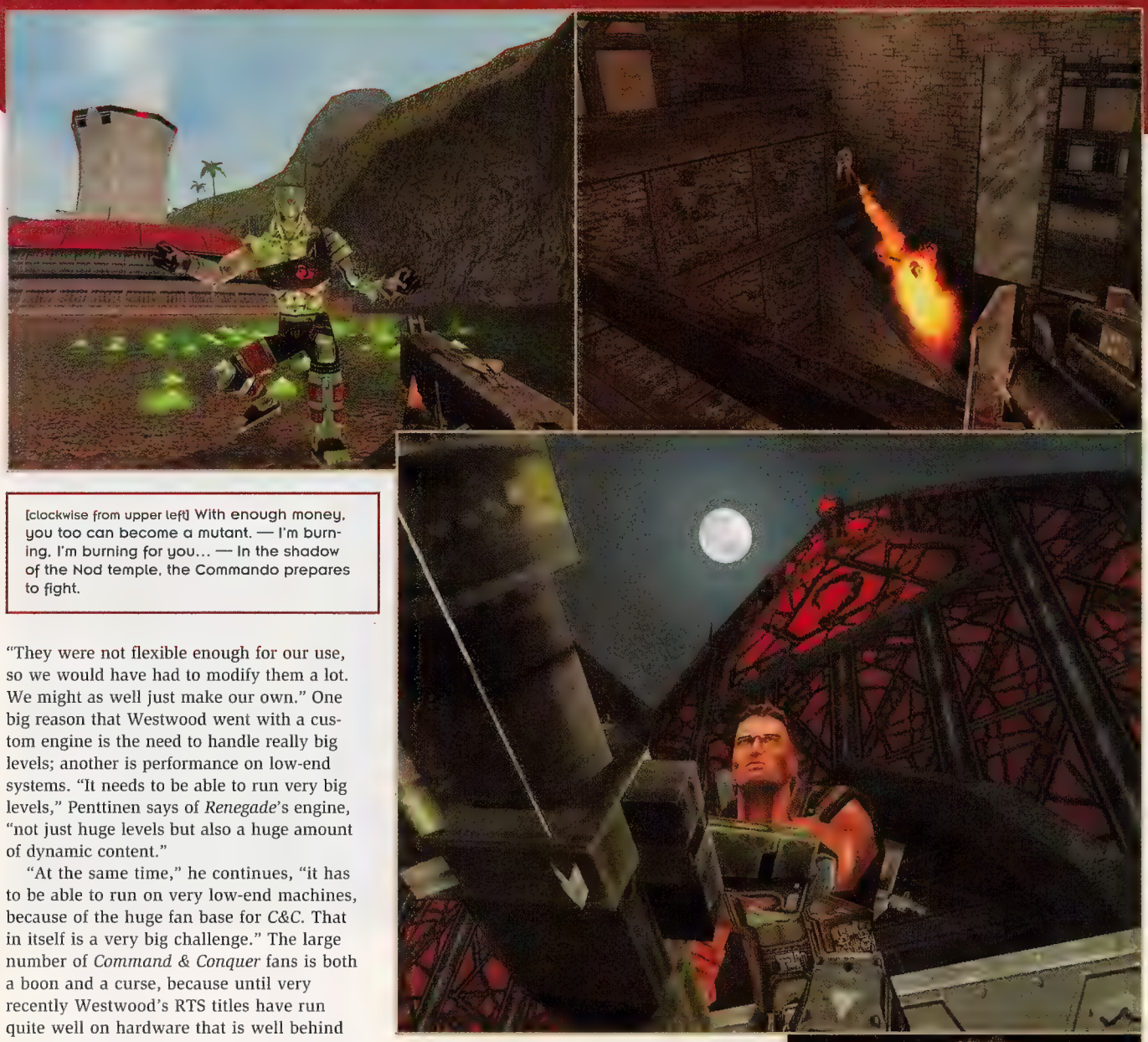
When controlling vehicles, the mouse will by default move the weapon or turret, with the keyboard (generally, WASD) controlling movement. You'll be able to hop into static turrets, lumbering APCs, HUMMVEEs, dune buggies, light and Mammoth tanks, and maybe more. With an enforced third person view and separate turret and movement controls, vehicular combat is relatively painless, and seems to add a welcome bit of variety to the game. Of course, you'll face enemy vehicles as well, some of which you'll be able to hijack and use for your self.

Ammo, health, and additional weapons will be available, although the delivery mechanism will likely be the dreaded crate—another *C&C* tradition as well as a hoary shooter standby. At least, with *Renegade*, anything you find will stay with you throughout subsequent missions. There are over twenty weapons or variations of weapons for your pyrotechnic enjoyment, and during the course of the game you'll probably need all of them. You'll start off with your trusty pistol (silent but, with a head shot, deadly—"there are about 12 different damage zones you can hit," says Cermak), a knife, and a sniper rifle, which is enough to handle your run-of-the-mill Hand of Nod troopers. Later weapons include such standbys as a grenade launcher, automatic rifle, combat shotgun, and rocket launcher, but the real stars are the *C&C*-specific boomsticks. How about a Tiberium Auto Rifle? A GDI Tiberium Flechette Gun? A Volt Auto Rifle? Westwood loyalists should be in heaven.

Then there are the really big guns, like the Personal Ion Cannon, the Nod Obelisk Module, and the GDI Ion Cannon Beacon. Place one of those next to an enemy structure and watch the fireworks—the sky darkens, the wind picks up, rain begins to fall, and then the Ion Cannon fires, obliterating the target. It's like being in, well, a *Command & Conquer* game, which is rather the intent. At times, as you're wielding your weapons, you'll see other battles, between your GDI allies and the forces of Nod. Sometimes GDI will be winning, other times Nod—most such encounters aren't scripted. Speaking of one such sequence, where GDI aircraft buzz a Nod base, Cermak confesses he's never sure what will happen. "I've seen them fly through unscathed, and I've seen them blown from the sky," he says. The result is a fairly dynamic game world within the confines of a very structured game.

Technically, *Renegade* relies on a custom-built 3D engine, the brainchild of Jani Penttinen, the young Finnish Lead 3D Architect for the game. Penttinen says the team looked at other game engines, including *Quake III* and *Unreal Tournament*, but decided to go the home-grown route in the end.

Cermak notes, "We are aiming for total and complete immersion. This is really less about being a



[clockwise from upper left] With enough money, you too can become a mutant. — I'm burning. I'm burning for you... — In the shadow of the Nod temple, the Commando prepares to fight.

"They were not flexible enough for our use, so we would have had to modify them a lot. We might as well just make our own." One big reason that Westwood went with a custom engine is the need to handle really big levels; another is performance on low-end systems. "It needs to be able to run very big levels," Penttinen says of *Renegade*'s engine, "not just huge levels but also a huge amount of dynamic content."

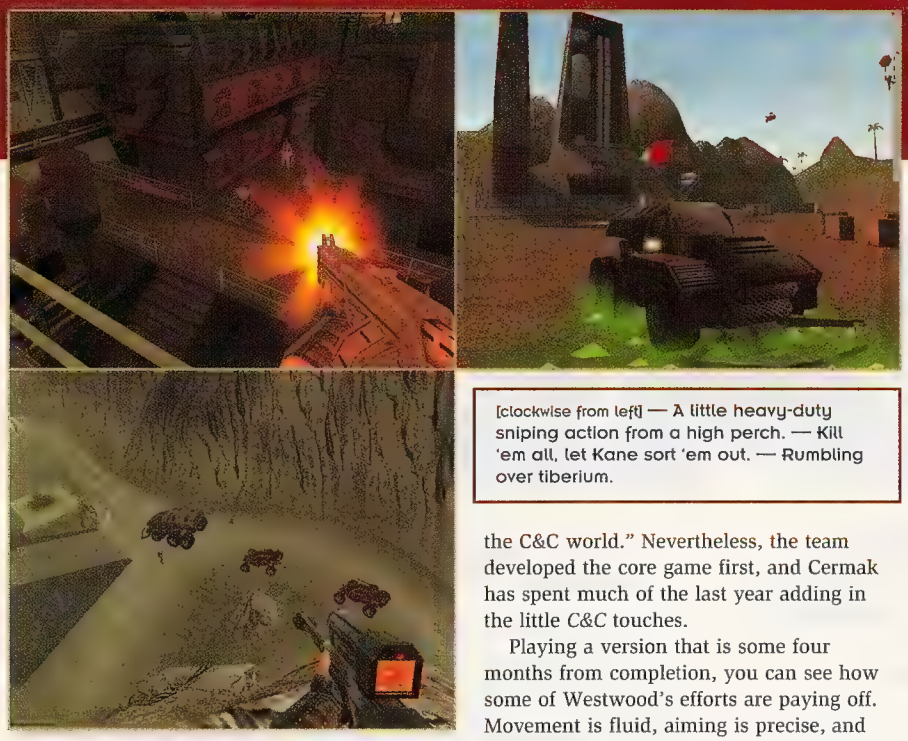
"At the same time," he continues, "it has to be able to run on very low-end machines, because of the huge fan base for *C&C*. That in itself is a very big challenge." The large number of *Command & Conquer* fans is both a boon and a curse, because until very recently Westwood's RTS titles have run quite well on hardware that is well behind the state of the art. If the company wants to sell *Renegade* to existing fans, it will have to ensure that the game will run on a wide variety of less than optimal systems. And then, there's the future to think about. "It's not just this game; we want to have a base to build on," Penttinen says, and there won't be any future if high requirements keep too many fans away. So don't look for too many GeForce 3-only features: "We can't expend too much effort supporting something only 1% of the people have." You should be able to run the game well enough with a PIII 500, a TNT2 card, and 64MB of RAM, though Penttinen not surprisingly says that more RAM will be a definite plus.

An army of one

The core single-player game in *Renegade* includes 11 missions, each with an extensive map. Locations run the gamut from your typical RTS-map deserts, to Bavarian villages, to underground complexes. You'll take the fight to the Nod indoors and out, and one of the real hooks for the game is the ability to see, at ground level, what a GDI or Nod base really looks like. The development team is taking pains to make sure what you see is as close to what you remember from the real-time strategy game as they can make it. That holds true for more than just art, too. Bust into a Hand of Nod, which in *C&C* trains infantry units, and you'll face a horde of Nod soldiers, and fight your way through several floors of training and housing facilities.

The game's story will play out as you complete your missions, and each map will offer optional side quests as well. These diversions won't be essential to the game, but will fill in various parts of the storyline, and might lead you to a cache of weapons or other trinkets. Just as in *Command & Conquer*, your map will only display areas you've actually visited, as the game reproduces Westwood's much-maligned but very familiar fog of war system perfectly. For fans of the RTS games, the immersion level appears very high, but not so extreme as to repel gamers who just want a good shooter. Still, Cermak notes, "We are aiming for total and complete immersion. This is really less about being a first-person shooter and more about giving the player a new perspective on

first-person shooter and more about giving the player a new perspective on the C&C world."



[clockwise from left] — A little heavy-duty sniping action from a high perch. — Kill 'em all, let Kane sort 'em out. — Rumbling over tiberium.

the C&C world." Nevertheless, the team developed the core game first, and Cermak has spent much of the last year adding in the little *C&C* touches.

Playing a version that is some four months from completion, you can see how some of Westwood's efforts are paying off. Movement is fluid, aiming is precise, and even with preliminary graphic and sound effects, the weapons are already satisfyingly destructive. The environments are distinctive and visually satisfying, with what appears to be a good balance between sprawling confusion and confining linearity. You can use stealth in some cases, relying on your knife or pistol for quiet kills, or you can rely on brute force like your C4 charges. The variety of enemies you'll face, ranging from standard grunts to Chem Warriors to all sorts of vehicles mandate a wide assortment of countermeasures.

Defensively, you'll have armor, and the occasional vehicle. You'll have to watch out for tiberium fields, too, which can poison you if you're not adequately protected. One way to minimize your danger is to use the standoff range of your sniper rifle, one of the game's basic weapons. In true *Command & Conquer* fashion, units getting sniped will have to close the range before they can engage you, opening the way for useful tactics like luring the bad buys into ambushes with a little judicious long-range plinking. The mission maps are full of good sniping locations and nooks and crannies for avoiding combat for a spell, and caches of goodies seem pretty well scattered throughout.

A Nod towards multiplayer

Multiplayer support is a standard feature of 3D shooters, and *Renegade* will have the usual deathmatch and Capture the Flag modes for your basic fragging pleasure. Recognizing the value of the *Command & Conquer* setting, however, Westwood is offering what they call the "*C&C* mode" as well, a team-based multiplayer format based around the GDI/Nod conflict. It's a mix of traditional team-based games like Capture the Flag with the class system of *Team Fortress Classic* and the monetary rewards and purchasing structure of *Counter-Strike*, with a touch of *Tribes 2* thrown in for good measure.

In this mode, you start out as a lowly infantryman, with basic weapons and gear. As you kill the enemy and survive games, you gain money, which you can use to upgrade your "class," becoming a heavy weapons guy or a Chem Warrior or the like. You can also, if you accumulate enough money, buy a vehicle to tool around in—or you can just steal an enemy tank, if you conveniently find one. Of course, if you want vehicles you'll have to keep your factory going, which means defending your power station as well. The goal of each mission is to destroy the enemy base, and knocking out power stations and factories is a good way to start.

You'll face fixed defenses as well as enemy troops, and each multiplayer mission should see a lot of back and forth as each side tries to wrack up the kills needed to advance players up the technological ladder. Eventually, you could even blow all of your accumulated wealth on an Ion Cannon beacon, to destroy the enemy base in one fell swoop, but getting that much cash is likely to be quite a tall order, with the full panoply of *Command & Conquer* units and weapons to deal with.

Westwood is planning on a server system similar to most shooters these days, with a few company servers supplementing however many user-run servers the market will bear. You shouldn't have to go through Westwood Online to play *Renegade*, unlike with the company's other online-capable titles, and you'll be able to set up dedicated game servers for optimum performance.

Brave New World

Westwood is taking something of a gamble with *Renegade*. Though the team includes people with shooter experience (from Raven and Ritual no less), and Cermak says that "a good portion of the team are rabid players and we have many hours logged in *Counterstrike*," this is still the first full-bore action title from a company best known for its real-time strategy games. It's also a game that may or may not resonate with Westwood's core audience, who has so far been quite pleased with a steady diet of incrementally improved but fundamentally identical games. "We don't do new, we do familiar but high-quality games," says Cermak, and that's been the company's credo for years now. Luckily for him and the other people in the Las Vegas studio, *Renegade* has the makings of a solid 3D shooter, with enough polish and flair to compete well in a crowded market.

And besides, where else can you carry a Personal Ion Cannon? Watch out Kane, the Commando is on the loose. ●

Smoke on the water, fire in the sky...

Getting your HEAD into the game

Technology is finally catching up with gamers' desire to save face

by Marshal M. Rosenthal

Today's players expect their games to feature photo-realistic characters approximating real life, and why not? Graphics hardware, after all, has become both powerful and inexpensive. But even though the electronic entertainment industry is spending millions of dollars and thousands of hours trying to realistically recreate and animate a person digitally in 3D, nothing has changed for those gamers who want to get *themselves* into the game. Even given all the graphical sophistication and fluid animation, you're still playing with characters that have been created by the game designer/programmer, and that look exactly as he or she wants them. It doesn't matter what you call it—face mapping, digitally recreating facial characteristics, or just plastering that kisser on that big bozo's face. The fact is that mainstream gaming still hasn't completely taken that final leap to a world where the player can see himself—not an approximation, but his actual image—inhabiting the game world.

What s needed to change this is twofold: first you have to find a way to get the gamer s face onto a game character. If it s just a simple picture, that s 2D and not very exciting. So there needs to be a way to take the picture of the person s face from a series of cameras all shooting simultaneously and then assembling the multitude of images into a duplicate of the original.

Secondly, the technology running the game has to be able to handle the added stress of the gamer s image that now inhabits the game world.

Now if this topic were discussed five years ago, we could stop right here. But fortunately technologies are being put in place that will let gamers clone themselves and realize their dream of finally getting into the game.

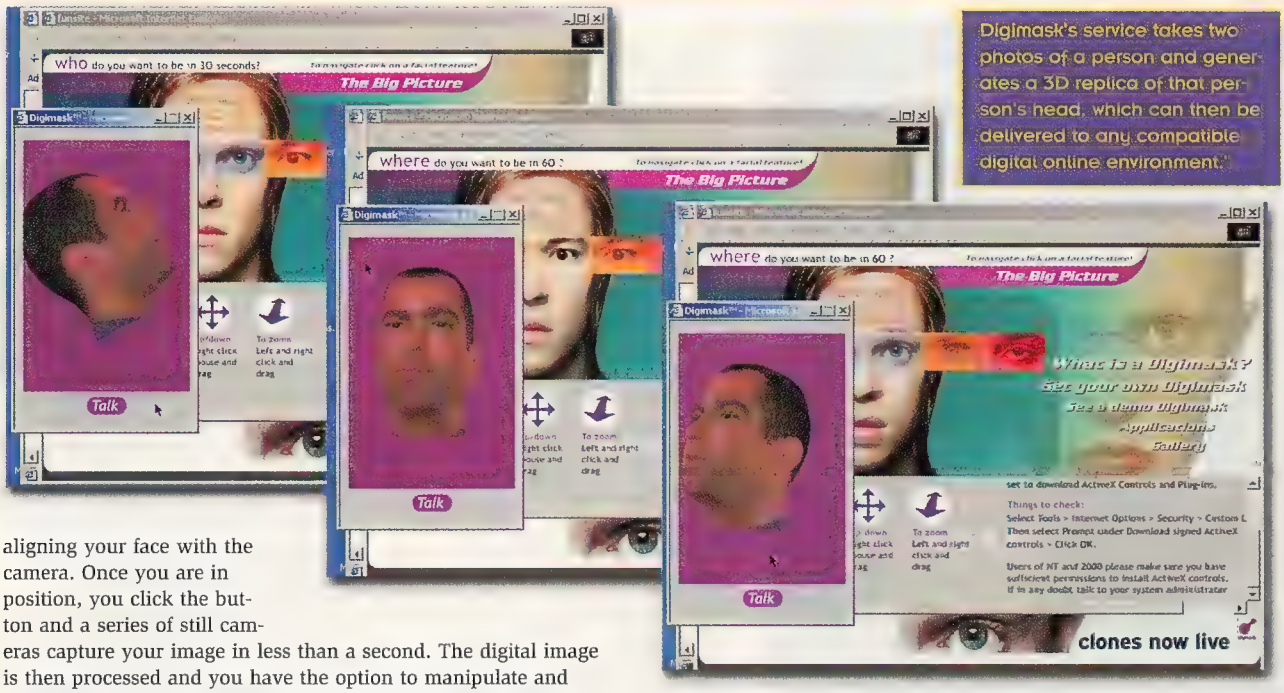
We don't need no stinkin' 2D

3D imaging has been a bit of a Holy Grail, says Gary Bracey, a 20 year veteran of the video game industry, and CEO for U.K.-based Digimask. It s only been recently that graphics cards and consoles have made a huge leap in terms of resolution and fidelity for 3D objects. The company makes available a service online in which they take two photos of a person (one face-on and one side-profile) and generate a fully articulated 3D replica of that person s head. (According to Bracey, the quality is, by and large, governed by the quality of the original photos submitted.) In addition to being delivered back to the user for local hard-drive, memory-card, etc. storage, a copy is also stored on Digimask s server, allowing this head to be delivered to any other digital online environment/application (for example, *Quake*, whereby the user can import his/her head into the game and play with multiple friends online). Digimask supplies a dedicated Software Development Kit to developers that allows them to convert the Digimask format into their own, hence allowing importation of the players heads.

Basically, any type of game allowing real time 3D and human characters will work, he says. We have already signed up a number of games, including a very big licensed one, to be released late 2001, but as we are under non disclosure agreements with all of these developers/publishers, we are unable to reveal precisely what they are right now.

It ain't your daddy's picture booth...

3Q, Inc. s approach to digitally recreating and animating a person requires going to a location where a 3Q picture booth resides. Similar to those grungy photo-booths found in arcades since time immemorial, paying for and entering the booth begins a complex series of technologies that will result in a 3D clone. After paying the $14.99 and entering your personal information and activation code into the booth computer, you sit down and follow the instructions on an electronic screen as it guides you through the process of



Digimask's service takes two photos of a person and generates a 3D replica of that person's head, which can then be delivered to any compatible digital online environment.

aligning your face with the camera. Once you are in position, you click the button and a series of still cameras capture your image in less than a second. The digital image is then processed and you have the option to manipulate and customize the 3D image as desired, adding scars or kisses, choosing body types and helmet types, to create the character. When you are satisfied, the 3D clone is burned onto a CD-ROM, which you are able to take away from the store. This CD will contain scripts to allow for uploading your character into a range of games. For more experienced gamers, the CD will also contain 3D image files for developing new 3D characters and upload scripts. Right now, the booth is in trial use in Seattle, Dallas and San Jose, with US nationwide rollout anticipated in early to mid 2002.

According to Christopher Lane, 3Q s CEO (and a veteran with 24 years of experience in the information technology industry), 3D image capture has been available in the entertainment and health care industries for some quite some time. What 3Q s technology does is offer for the first time to gamers a capture method that is as economical to use as it is of very high accuracy and extreme realism, explains Lane. Our acquisition devices fire multiple digital cameras positioned around the subject simultaneously, with complex mathematics then creating the digital image. Typically, the image is captured in eight milliseconds so it is both a very accurate and realistic image, as there is no degradation caused by movement. It is also a faithful geometric reproduction of the subject s actual shape.

Currently, the PC games that can be used with 3Q s cloning technology are *Quake*, *Half-Life*, *Counterstrike* and *Unreal* (with others to be available soon), however most existing games will require only a little modification in order to accept a 3Q clone.

Lane says that while most games are built so characters can be imported, the developers haven t released the utilities to the public. But this could change as game developers continue to work at achieving greater realism of the digitized human form. Most games engines are designed independently of the characters and we see this trend continuing as new concepts for animateable models are developed, he says, adding that he doesn t believe that support of 3Q clones will require any technology which is not already under development.

Our goal, continues Lane, is to promote personalization in cyberspace. For many gamers we think this increases their identification with the game and a sense of participation. But for other gamers it actually extends the creative process. You can start by adding customized bodies and costumes. The accuracy of 3Q s source data means your clone can be used as the basis for all types of intelligent morphing, so your game character s features become a derivative of yours. Already in the booth you can select routines which inflate or deflate the facial features that fit different types of personae. We see this feature being extended significantly to embrace different emotions, or to create the ability to age, or to blend in with the game s theme.

Even more play

Leave it to Sony to come up with a way for gamers to get their faces into games. It has created a standard for the Playstation2 called Picture Paradise, and basically any device conforming to this standard can transfer digital images into the Playstation2. Where it gets exciting is that this middleware will also allow game software to

The actual 3Q Q-Clone Generator booth

"Our goal is to promote personalization in cyberspace. For many gamers we think this increases their identification with the game and a sense of participation. But for other gamers it actually extends the creative process."

—Christopher Lane, CEO, 3Q

3Q, Inc. Q-Clone Generator

A whole new thing in troll booths

The Q-Clone trial booths are in San Jose, Seattle, and Plano Texas. There is also a "traveling booth" that has been to Cyberathlete Professional League events as well as the Game Developers Conference and Electronic Entertainment Exposition. Its most current appearance is at SIGGRAPH 2001 in Los Angeles in August.

3Q is now in the process of looking to extend the trial into other US cities and some in Europe. Exact timings and locations have not yet been finalized but it's expected that this will start happening in the late summer.

Screen shot of what it looks like to have your image integrated into Quake

The feedback from the trials has led them to consider a number of product and pricing options. They are anticipating continuing an entry level product along the lines of the current pricing model covering a clone and bundle of games—this entry level product will be no more than $15. They may also consider premium bundles with more games and additional visits to the store to develop new personalities. There has also been some discussion with publishers about co-promotions by including a specific "clone voucher" with a supported game (hopefully these options will provide levels of product appropriate to the gamer's budget).

The following are specifications for face capture in the Q-Clone Generator v.1.0 (face capture configuration) Device:

- CAPTURE AREA: front of face, stopping at the front of the ears
- FOOTPRINT: 6ft wide x 4ft deep x 6ft tall
- UNIT: self-contained and no moving parts
- CUSTOMER INTERFACES: one external for personal data entry and one internal for cloning process
- SOCIAL FEATURE: one monitor on top of booth to allow spectators to follow the progress of the person being cloned. Spectators get to see everything the person in the Q-Clone Generator experiences – the capture, face manipulation, viewing, etc.
- COMPUTING POWER: One 800 MHz Pentium III - used for point-of-sale transaction, personal demographic data storage, and image processing
- **Transaction Activation**: customer types in a randomly generated 10-digit transaction number and inserts the 3Q CD-ROM
- CAMERA CONFIGURATION: Three total; two-geometry and one texture/color
- CAPTURE SPEED: 8 milliseconds
- IMAGE PROCESSING: 5 seconds
- INTERNET CONNECTION: 56K dial up modem
- PRODUCT DELIVERY: Burned to CD-ROM in-store while you wait

access and use these images see where this is going? This means a digital camera or even a camcorder conforming to the standard can be linked to the PS2, and the transferred images accessed by the game and mapped onto designated characters in both 2D and 3D.

But while Takashi Kondo, senior vice-president, Sony Electronics Digital Imaging Product Division, says that Sony would like to expand its use to other brand s imaging devices and game consoles, for right now that means using Sony s Cyber-shot digital still cameras and/or Handycam digital camcorders (with USB). These are the models that have been produced since October 2000, including the Cyber-shot DSC-S30, DSC-S50, DSC-S70, DSC-F505, DSC-F505V, DSC-P1, the Sony Mavica MVC-FD92 and MVC-FD97, and the DCR-PC110 camcorder.

TECMO s fall release, *Monster Rancher 3*, will be the first PS2 title to enable this feature, with players able to upload a digital still into the game and place the 2D image onto one of the monster characters. First you attach the camera/camcorder to the PS2, and then access the game s editing screen that lets you upload an image. This is placed in a grid where you can tweak it for instance, placement of eyes can be moved around. The finished image can either be a mask or replace the monster s face entirely. The whole operation only takes a minute or two to do, each monster can have its own mask, and the masks can be saved with the monster s settings for continued use. PictureParadise s use in the Tecmo game is cool, but it only scratches the surface, according to Mio Ozawa, a Sony Corporation executive managing the PictureParadise project in the US. The current use for the technology is to put the player s facial image onto the characters in the game, but the technology allows the computer game console to become a digital imaging platform, she says. How the game developers decide to apply our technology into their games is entirely up to their creativity and imagination.

You never walk alone...or do you?

What about those who are creating games then? Does it peeve them that players want to roll their own when it comes to what the characters should look like?

Some might say that this all began with *The Sims*, Maxis contribution to letting gamers interact with life-like characters that behave like those in the real world, and which fueled a desire to not just control real people, but be able to get oneself into the game as well. But according to Eric Chin, one of Maxis Computer Artists, this trend of people wanting to see themselves as game characters has been going on for many, many years. Chin says that people have been projecting themselves into games ever since the beginning of

"...there's already software out there for custom making a personal avatar to use there [in a chat room]—that's basically a 'stand-in' for a person—so ex-tending this to games is certainly logical and reasonable." —Eric Chin, Maxis

gaming it doesn t matter whether the technology could let them actually do it or not before, nor does it limit the imagination just because the graphics have gotten so much better. It s all about infusing yourself into the character you re playing with, he says.

Of course Chin points out that there are times when extending yourself into the game doesn t make sense such as playing a monster or unearthly character this would spoil the illusion of the game. But from a design sense, giving the gamer the option to decide for himself who he wants to be is both valid and achievable in today s games. After all, says Chin, in *Quake* you can put a skin onto a character, but for right now it s a limited option because it

"I for one would love to see tech like this, but I fear the code is not 'small' enough or 'dummy proof' enough to make it a reality." —Jeff Smith, Gathering of Developers

doesn t really look like you. But Chin notes this will change as developers utilize 3D to create realistic and usable characters with the illusion of life, and build in more options for giving the gamer greater control over his character. Take a look at chat rooms, he says, there s already software out there for custom making a personal avatar to use there that s basically a stand-in for a person so extending this to games is certainly logical and reasonable.

So being able to create a personal character that looks like you is not an issue as long as it suits the story whether in *The Sims* or *Unreal* or *Tribes*. It s not a question of whether it s doable but whether there s value in doing it. And that s something for the gamer to decide, concludes Chin.

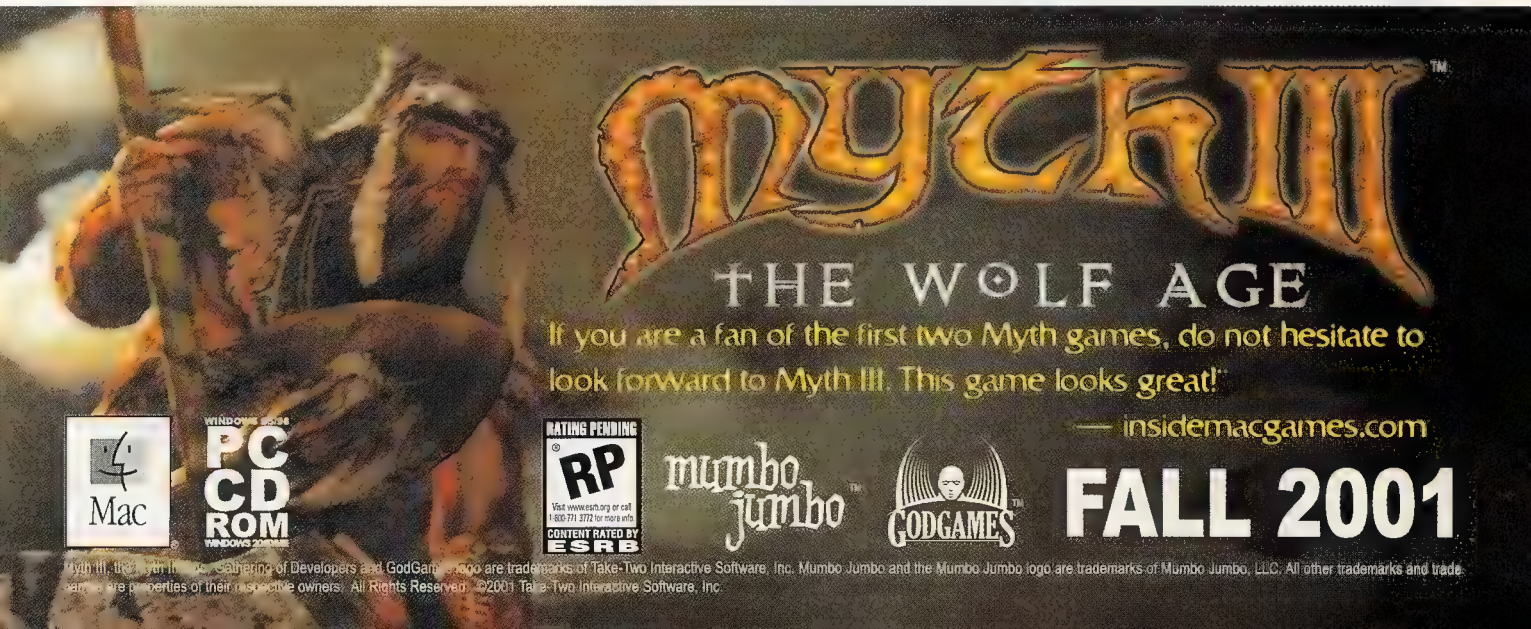
Marc Holmes agrees that players should have the option of altering game characters. As Art Director on Bioware s *Neverwinter Nights*, he s psyched by the idea of inputting players images into games but feels that it ll be a good five years or more before the execution will work. While the amount of physics simulation needed to support something like this would be staggering, I suppose this is getting to be a popular idea, but the technology isn t even close yet, he says. Scanning your body and your own movements into *Quake III*, for instance, is just not going to happen. I hear you can now have your face plastered on a *Quake* skin, but hey you can get your head on a coffee mug too, and it s probably cheaper and more useful.

Remember, he says, games are very delicately controlled false realities, and I don t think the kind of ultimate reality where you have a person s face or body skinned over a character is going to make for better games. Do you really want to see a movie where you replace the hero with your own face? That s kind of, specifically *not* the point of drama, isn t it? Is it not the assumption of a role that makes role-playing an escape? Playing yourself all the time is not the reason we read novels, or see movies. It may be interesting tech, but it s not suited to dramatic fiction.

Director of public relations for game publisher Gathering of Developers Jeff Smith, however, can see the benefit of customizing a game character with your own face. It pretty much ensures you stand out aside others in the quest to be the best, he says, adding that online gamers are more likely to want to do this since they make it a point to differentiate themselves when in the online arena.

But he does see problems, as cheating would be rampant, plus the human error factor would all but cripple most servers that would host such a game. I for one would love to see tech like this, but I fear the code is not small enough or dummy proof enough to make it a reality, he says. Smith doesn t believe that single player games will be able to include such technology any time soon. Editors are not as common in single player games as multi-player games, so editing tools are usually in-house tools developed by the development team, for the development team. Although, he muses, single player games may be the place to break in with some face scan, physics model-type editor. You wouldn t have to worry about other computers viewing your image or the downloading that would go along with multi-play.

Still Smith feels that this whole process/evolution/next step of totally custom characters is happening right now. Virtually all hard core FPS players have some custom skins in their closet, he says, and it s just that finding a standard for such abilities is the only thing keeping a Jeff Smith replication (face and physics) away from the folks. If id or Valve would press the issue with their fans, I know all would rally around until total customization was a feature of every game. I think all this evolution would require, to be the norm, would be DSL/Cable for everyone, a fool-proof editor and some solid-ass code from a premiere developer that has hardware/servers to test on. So, John Carmack, if you are listening, I ask you to go crazy and make this happen.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Online, in your face...

Online games are another story entirely, since the whims and irregularities of networking and limited bandwidth have such an effect on them. Destination Games was founded by Richard Garriott, the creator of the Ultima computer games and now part of Korean-based NCsoft, which is currently operating the largest subscription-based online game in the world, *Lineage: The Blood Pledge*. According to Starr Long, a producer at Destination Games and former head of the of the team that produced *Ultima Online* and its canceled sequel, being able to input facial scans of gamers into online games is doable right now. The repercussions, however, could be that the game could be overwhelmed and slowed to a crawl from having to process all the unique textures. I would not actively want to stream this information to the player because it would certainly increase the initial download, he says. Since dial-up still constitutes the majority of online access, Long says that in lieu of fast bandwidth, games would need to include an option to turn off these graphics in favor of the standard art.

However, there s still the matter of getting those scans made in the first place. Since the kind of 3D scanning technology that is needed to be truly photo-realistic isn t available for the average consumer at home, the use of such images will tend to occur faster in places where scanning booths could be located. This would be ideal for such places as game rooms in Korea, Long hypothesizes, because then the booths could be directly connected to the gaming network, giving players access to convenient scanning technology as well as allowing for policing of possibly offensive images by the game room operators.

Long believes that most players will prefer anonymity when playing at least in role-playing environments: Being anonymous allows players to act however they wish without fear of personal, real-life repercussions, he says. Starr reasons this is so because most games are about allowing players to do things that are not socially acceptable in real life, killing or harassing people for instance. Most of the players in the games are playing themselves albeit free of inhibition and in a different context, i.e. they act like they would in real life if they could be anonymous and swing a broadsword, he says. They like their character to look like something different than themselves for the most part, more ideal in a way (bigger muscles, cooler clothes, etc.). So I could see people wanting to put themselves in a game albeit in an idealized fashion. The argument that players are in effect lazy now that computer games look more real is a tired one I think. This argument says that when games were text only (Infocom, MUDs, etc.) that players were more imaginative. I think this is simply untrue. Just look at all the imaginative things players do with games despite the improvements in imagination sapping graphics. Activities like MODS for shooters or plays in *Ultima Online* prove that players are as imaginative as ever. If anything technology has given them the opportunity to flex their imagination more, not less.

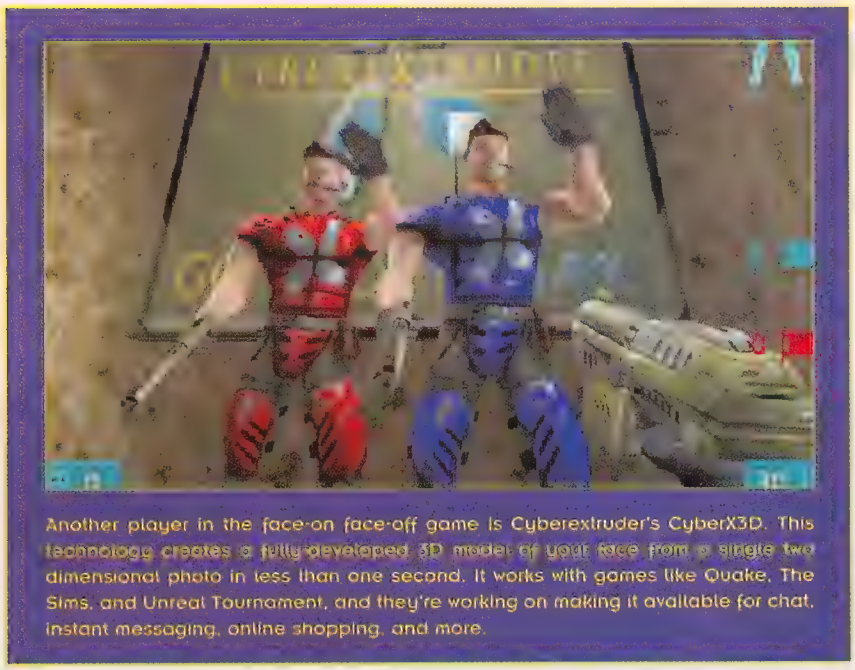
> "It would immediately give players something they could relate to in the game environment no matter how alien it is."
>
> —Starr Long, Destination Games

But Long does admit that he can see a benefit in people seeing themselves in the game: It would immediately give players something they could relate to in the game environment no matter how alien it is, he says. But the big downside I see is the use of this technology for grief tactics imagine all the pornographic scans that might end up as skins. For me, I would rather provide the players with more tools to modify the fictional game characters (clothes, equipment, skin texture/color, prosthetics, accessories, tattoos, piercings, faces, body size/proportion, etc.).

Finally, Long cautions that there is a potential danger of making real-life information, like your appearance, available to other players. Players take the competition in these games very seriously and personally, he says. If they know that the person that just killed them for the 40th time is really that annoying Bobby from across the street, they might just take their in-game frustration out of the game and throw a brick through Bobby s window.

EverQuest producer Jeff Butler doesn t think the technology will fly either. At this time, I don t sense a desire from any of our players to appear as their real life selves in the game, he says. That may have a lot to do with *EverQuest* being a fantasy-oriented game where escapism is part of the allure in portraying a role and persona *other* than their own. Beyond that, I can t see it happening in related games due to a bandwidth and texture memory limitation. The technology doesn t exist to my knowledge, and I haven t heard of it being pursued.

All in all, companies seem to believe that, with some exceptions, we don t necessarily want more reality in our games at least not in the form of a virtual mirror. It ll be a while before we see how 3D imaging will affect gameplay on the various platforms, and whether we will grow to accept avatars that look like us but for some of us, it might be exactly what we re playing games to escape from. ●



Another player in the face-on face-off game is Cyberextruder's CyberX3D. This technology creates a fully-developed 3D model of your face from a single two dimensional photo in less than one second. It works with games like Quake, The Sims, and Unreal Tournament, and they're working on making it available for chat, instant messaging, online shopping, and more.

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TECHNICALITIES

the trojan horse

Will Xbox become a PC for your living room?

The Xbox. When you look at the parts inside, it s practically a computer. There are people on message boards and forums all over the Internet that insist it s a Trojan Horse for Microsoft after they sell tens of millions of Xbox systems, Microsoft will supposedly turn it into a PC.

The argument typically goes something like this: It s exactly the kind of thing Microsoft would do. Why *wouldn t* Microsoft want tens of millions more Windows PCs in the market Windows PCs that are totally standardized and don t have compatibility problems? That s usually enough of an argument to convince the Microsoft-bashers on the net. It also doesn t rely on a shred of actual evidence and doesn t really make a lot of sense when you start to ask why.

Turning Xbox into a PC isn t a very Microsoft-like business move. Microsoft might make a lot of slick business maneuvers, but it rarely sneaks in the back door. Its *modus operandi* is not bait and switch. It s a three-step process that has been duplicated (or at least attempted) in virtually every market it s participated in. First, get your foot in the door. Get the distributors, retailers, and wholesalers to carry your product, and make the consumer aware of it. Second, embrace and extend. Steadily improve the product by doing what competitors are doing, sometimes better, and market the hell out of it. Third, eliminate the opposition, which is the part they get in a lot of legal trouble over. This process led to the company s success with operating systems, office software, mice, web browsers, you name it. It s probably the Xbox plan as well.

> "Microsoft hasn't shown even the slightest desire to turn Xbox into something PC-like. I don't think they ever will."

The best reason not to turn Xbox into a PC is the financial one. Remember the economic model of consoles: lose money on the console and make it all back on royalties for its proprietary software. Let s say that Xbox would see a price drop to maybe $199 by the time Microsoft would start turning it into a PC. They d probably get the cost of production down to where they only lose $50 a box, or maybe even break even and only lose money marketing it. If you have a $200 box, you re not going to pay $90 for Windows and $200 for an office suite, plus the cost of a mouse and keyboard. All that stuff would have to be cheaper than the PC counterparts, perhaps even free. So Microsoft makes back, at best, $40-50 on the software that turns Xbox into a PC. Then what? Then people buy the console just to use it as a PC (why not, it s so much cheaper?). They don t buy games or they buy regular PC games, which Microsoft doesn t earn royalties on.

This is why console manufacturers restrict their systems to playing games. Games are throwaway entertainment something you play, put on the shelf, and then move on to a new game. It s a continuous source of revenue from royalties. A word processor, spreadsheet, web browser, or email program is used for years. The last thing Microsoft wants to do is start subsidizing the cost of PC hardware, but that s exactly what they would do if they turned Xbox into one. They make a lot more money if more people use PCs for PC-like activities.

But what if the market wants living room PCs? you say. Microsoft wouldn t let that market slip away! Of course not. But they wouldn t use their subsidized hardware to get it, either. They d develop a special cut-down, low-resource version of Windows to run on the living room PCs made by Dell, Gateway, or Compaq. That way they get the software sales money and don t spend a dime on the hardware.

I think it s a moot argument anyway. The market will show that it doesn t want PC-like functions in the living room. The rest of the family doesn t want them hogging the TV to browse the web when they want to watch the news. The kids don t want Mom and Dad hogging the PS2 to do their taxes when they want to play games. TVs make terrible display devices for web browsing and email anyway, and nobody wants to buy all the peripherals necessary to make a console into a useable PC. Microsoft hasn t shown even the slightest desire to turn Xbox into something vaguely PC-like, and I don t think they ever will. It s not how the company normally operates, it doesn t make financial sense, and most importantly, it s not what consumers want. ●

TIP OF THE MONTH

Add to the Send To menu – Your Windows folder contains a hidden subfolder called "SendTo" (you might have to show hidden files/folders to see it). Adding shortcuts to this folder will make them appear in the Send To menu when you right-click on an item in Explorer. Try putting a shortcut to your printer there and use the Send To command to quickly print documents without opening them.

send questions to qa@cgonline.com

Q: I have a question for you about graphics of my computer and my PlayStation2. I would like to know which one has the ability to be better, because I am a gamer and am always looking towards new and improved graphics. As you probably already know the PS2 has a 128-bit Emotion Engine and all the rest of its system stats, but I just bought a new computer and I am wondering if it's really worth it. I bought a Gateway Pentium 4 with 128 MB, a GeForce2 Ultra graphics card and a Sound Blaster Live sound card... etc.

Randall G.

A: That's not an uncommon question, but it's a little difficult to give a straight answer. PlaySation2 games generally look better than PC games, even on high-end PCs, because the developers know that every single user has the exact same system and they can therefore take full advantage of it. The PlayStation 2's Emotion Engine is its CPU, and the system also has two vector processors and a graphics chip called the Graphics Synthesizer. Generally speaking, your system is more powerful in many ways. Perhaps the PlayStation2 is only faster in its ability to show a lot of polygons on the screen. But your CPU is more powerful, you have more RAM, your video card can handle textures better, and you have a hard drive.

So why do PS2 games look better? Because they're made to run at the resolution of a TV and they're highly optimized for the exact hardware inside every PS2. If a game developer were to make a game that only runs at 640x480 and requires a Pentium 4, 128MB of RAM, and a GeForce2 Ultra, it would likely look better on a TV than most PS2 games. Making PC games like that would be a disaster, though! That low resolution would look terrible on high-res computer monitors, and most of the computer owners with slower processors or video cards or not enough RAM wouldn't be able to run it at all.

So the reason why more expensive and, in many ways, more powerful PCs have games that look worse than new console games is because PC developers have to make games that can run on older, slower PCs as well. That's what most of the world has, after all.

This happens every time there's a new console release, of course. In two years it'll be 2003 and PCs will be far more powerful than any console. Even old PCs will be so powerful that PC games will look a lot better than console games. That will last for a couple years until the next wave of consoles are released, and the whole cycle will start over.

Q: I'm considering upgrading my motherboard to accommodate the latest DDR RAM. My question is, how much faster is this DDR RAM versus PC-133 SDRAM (which I have now)? And benchmarks and stats aside, would a gamer with an already decent system see a noticeable difference in performance? Is it worth the cost of a new motherboard and RAM?

Ed C.

A: If you already have a pretty fast Athlon system (which you would have to if you re going to use your existing chip in a motherboard that supports DDR RAM), you probably won t notice a whole lot of difference in most games. Most games are 10-15% faster, but some aren t any faster with DDR RAM while others are sped up more. A lot of it depends on your video card, as well. If you re at the limits of your video card, faster RAM won t help much.

DDR RAM is good and generally worth the marginal price premium when building a new system, but if you ve already got a nice setup and you d be buying a new motherboard and RAM *just* to switch to DDR, it s probably not worth the money. Hold out another half year or so until buying the new motherboard and RAM will also allow you to use a much faster processor..

Q: Why doesn't my mouse wheel work in games? There are always extra functions for the mouse wheel, but on my computer they don't work. The mouse wheel works for any other thing.

Jonathan W.

A: Mouse wheel support in games can often be finicky. Nine times out of ten, it s a driver problem make sure you have the latest mouse drivers installed. If you ve got a Microsoft mouse, head to www.microsoft.com/mouse to find the latest drivers. If it s a Logitech mouse, try www.logitech.com/cf/support/.

TECHBYTES

Intel's Tiny Transistor— Intel claims to have made the world's smallest and fastest transistors. The most advanced transistors in processors that are widely used today are approaching .13 microns in size, but Intel has designed and manufactured transistors as small as .02 microns at its research facilities in Hillsboro, Oregon. This is good news—researchers were beginning to wonder if silicon-based chips were approaching their size limits. A chip based on .02 micron technology wouldn't appear until the year 2007 or so, but it could have nearly a billion transistors and run at around 20 GHz. By comparison, today's best microprocessors contain around 42 million transistors and operate at 1.8 GHz.

IBM's Strained Silicon— In more chip-breakthrough news, IBM has developed a new semiconductor technology that could speed up existing chips by as much as 35% and reduce power requirements at the same time. The process takes advantage of a tendency for atoms in compounds to align with one another. When silicon is placed on a substrate whose atoms spaced further apart, the atoms stretch to line up with the atoms beneath. IBM calls this "strained silicon" and claims that it offers 70% less electrical resistance, which means faster, cooler chips that consume less power, all without shrinking transistors. IBM intends to have this technology out of the labs and available in finished products as early as 2003.

137GB drive limit pushed— The current ATA specification for hard drives has a size limit of about 137 gigabytes. That might seem like a ridiculous amount, but with hard drives already pushing 100 GB, that limit is rapidly approaching. Now Maxtor, Intel, Microsoft, and VIA Technologies have banded together with a few other companies to develop what they call the "Big Drive Specification." Creative, aren't they? The main point of the new specification is to change ATA drives from 28-bit addressing to 48-bit. This change would move the theoretical size limit of an ATA drive from the current 137 gigabytes to—get this—144 petabytes. That's 144,000 gigabytes. The specification would also increase the maximum data that could be accessed in a single command from 256 sectors to 65,536 sectors (a jump from about 131 kilobytes to about 33 megabytes). Just as with previous changes to the ATAPI standard, these so-called ATAPI-6 drives would require some new interface logic and new BIOS logic on the motherboard. There's no telling when drives using this new interface will appear, but the proposal has been given to a standards committee that handles the ATAPI drive specification.

IBM has a tiny transistor, too— Just after Intel announced its triumphant development of the .02 micron silicon transistor, IBM researchers announced an almost bigger feat— the Silicon Germanium transistor. Using a combination of silicon and germanium allows IBM to make transistors that are much thinner than their pure silicon counterparts. In theory, chips made with silicon germanium could reach speeds of up to 210 GHz using only one milliamp of power. Don't expect to find this in your PC anytime soon, though. The technology is headed for smaller, higher-speed processors like those found in advanced networking equipment. It may also be used to make more advanced cell phones.

GeForce 3-some

Peeping at the most popular GeForce3 brands

by Jason Cross

When it comes to the GeForce3, you typically find a lot to like and one glaring sore spot: price. Video cards based on NVIDIA s new 3D chip initially featured retail prices of over $500, so it s a good thing we waited until they actually went on sale to take a look at them; a slight shipping delay meant that the cards actually went on sale at a reduced price of around $400.

That s not chump change. So how are the three most popular GeForce3 retail cards different from each other? Is it worth buying one over the other? And finally, are any of them worth the cost?

Gladiac 920

RATING ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER ELSA MSRP: $399

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Gladiac 920 stands out from the batch of GeForce3 cards in one of the only ways possible with unique bundled software. In this case, it s a full version of *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*. Not only that this version of *Giants* is special. It s been enhanced to take advantage of some DirectX 8 functions only currently available on the GeForce3. Character models feature higher polygon counts and often have better texturing, the water s transition to the land looks a little better, there are a few weather effects thrown in, and despite all this the framerate seems a little faster. The overall visual impact of the game has only changed in minor ways, so this version of *Giants* isn t much of a draw if you already have the game. If you don t, it s a souped-up version of a worthy title that adds some value to an otherwise plain-Jane GeForce3 card.

Beyond that one remarkable pack-in, the card is virtually identical in specifications, quality, and function to virtually every other GeForce3-based video card. It has TV-out but no DVI connector, so it s not what you want if there s a digital flat-panel display in your future.

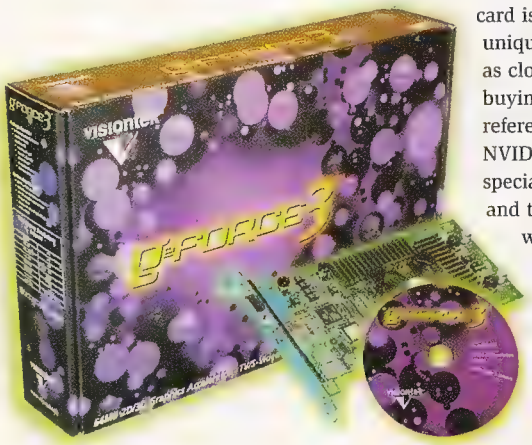
GeForce3

RATING ★★★★

MANUFACTURER: Visiontek MSRP: $399

VisionTek has been supplying graphics cards to computer manufacturers for quite awhile now, particularly in Asia. The GeForce3 marks their foray into the North American retail market, along with GeForce2 MX and TNT2 Vanta cards. They certainly didn t get creative with their product names, as their GeForce3 offering is simply called GeForce3.

Perhaps it s a boring name, but it lets you know exactly what you re getting. VisionTek s card is neither exciting nor unique in any way. This is as close as you can get to buying an actual GeForce3 reference card straight from NVIDIA, folks. There s no special software bundle, and the drivers that came with the review card are stock NVIDIA reference drivers. Granted, the only changes most manufacturers make to the drivers these days is to brand them with their own name, but VisionTek hasn t even gone that far. None of this makes the card a bad choice, though. In fact, the VisionTek GeForce3 overclocked ever-so-slightly better than the competition (your mileage may vary). There s TV-out but no DVI connector, and other than that this is just a stock GeForce3 card at an average price.



3D Prophet III

RATING ★★★★

MANUFACTURER: Hercules MSRP: $429

Hercules is one of the oldest names in consumer graphics cards, though now it s little more than the brand name for the graphics division of the Guillemot corporation. The reputation for quality is still deserved, though, as Guillemot s Hercules-brand cards are always well made. The 3D Prophet III is no exception; it s a solid, quality GeForce3 implementation that sports both TV-out and a DVI connector for digital flat panel displays. Beyond that, though, it s unremarkable. The drivers, as with most GeForce3 cards, are just re-branded reference drivers. The software bundle includes the excellent software DVD player *PowerDVD*, but ELSA s DVD player is just as good and there s really no other software worth mentioning here. It s almost too bad the tradition of bundling the demo for nearly every UbiSoft game under the sun hasn t continued in Hercules more recent cards with the number of upcoming games UbiSoft is publishing, that could actually have some value.

The 3D Prophet III retails for slightly more than competing GeForce3 cards (about $30), and it s probably not worth the price premium unless you really need that DVI connector. It s a solid card with a good warranty, but it performs just like every other GeForce3 card.

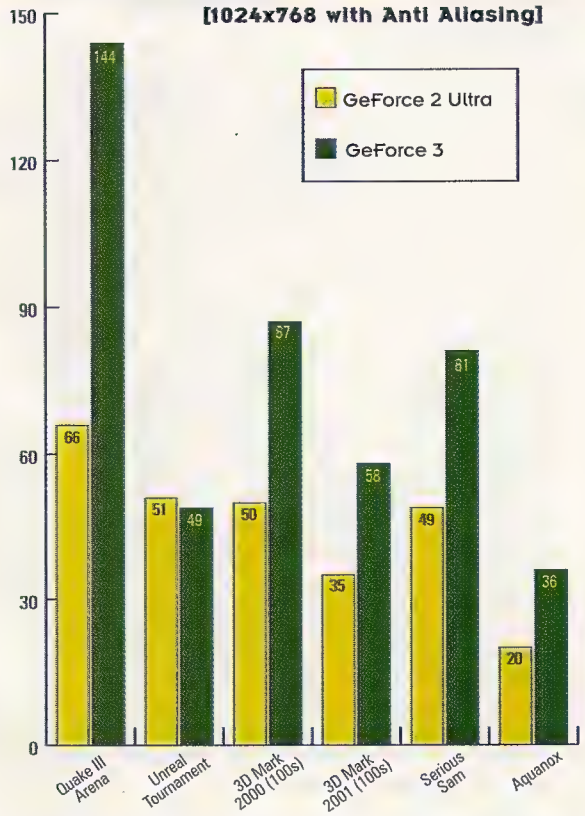
Should you buy one? Which one?

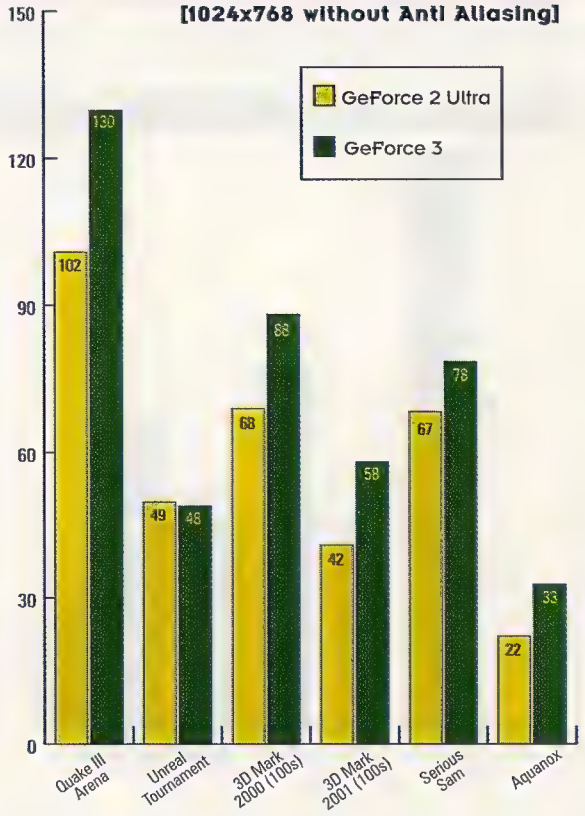
There s no doubt that GeForce3-based video cards are fantastic. It s faster than anything out there, has nice anti-aliasing options, and the addition of pixel and vertex shaders for full DirectX 8 compliance make it the only video card you can buy today that s really well positioned to get the most out of the hottest games of this Christmas season and beyond. If it wasn t for the $400 price tag, it would be a grand-slam 5-star gaming wonder. Even shopping around online (at least at press time), it s hard to find one for less than $350, and that s just too much to ask. Prices are dropping steadily, though. By the

time you read this, you might be able to find GeForce3 cards for $300 or less, which is a little easier to swallow. Our recommendation is to hang on to the video card you ve got until prices drop to a more comfortable range. If your current video card is just too old and slow, it might not be a bad idea to bite the bullet and shell out the big bucks for a GeForce3 card; with a full DirectX 8 hardware implementation, you ll be better prepared for all the hot games next year.

If you ve decided to buy, which one is best? If you have a digital flat-panel monitor, Hercules 3D Prophet III is the clear choice, and it might be a good idea if the falling LCD prices have you considering a flat-panel monitor purchase in the near future. Otherwise, just shop around for the best price. For all our testing, we were unable to find any significant difference between the various GeForce3-based video cards. They all run at 200 MHz with 460 MHz memory, they all overclock to roughly the same level, and they all use comparable drivers. Only ELSA s card manages to edge out the competition with a superior software bundle. A full-version *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*, enhanced a bit for DirectX 8, helps take a little of the sting out of the hefty price tag. ●

BENCHMARKS





All benchmarks performed on a 1.7 GHz Pentium 4 with 256 MB of RAM. Vsync was always disabled, 32-bit color modes were always selected, and sound was disabled whenever possible. *Quake 3 Arena* used version 1.27 and the "demo127" demo, with all settings set to maximum and trilinear filtering enabled. *Aquanox* tests performed with the looping "Aquamark" demo test, set to use the maximum 40 MB of textures. *Serious Sam* scores reported are the "average without excessive peaks" value taken from the Karnak Peaceful Night Coop demo. *Unreal Tournament* was benchmarked using the UTBench test demo. Comments: In all our testing, every brand of GeForce3 card performed identically. So for the sake of clarity and brevity, we're just printing one "GeForce3" listing, comparing it to the GeForce2 Ultra.

GMachines Omega

Well it s certainly not the Alpha

by Jason Cross

MANUFACTURER Gmachines [www.gmachines.com]
MSRP $3800 as reviewed, $2682 without monitor and speakers

Anyone can slap together some components to make a PC with impressive specs. Buying a ready-made PC isn t just about what the pieces are, but how they re put together and what you pay for them. GMachines top-end PC from their Omega line is certainly fast, but there are just enough nagging issues to keep them from a full recommendation.

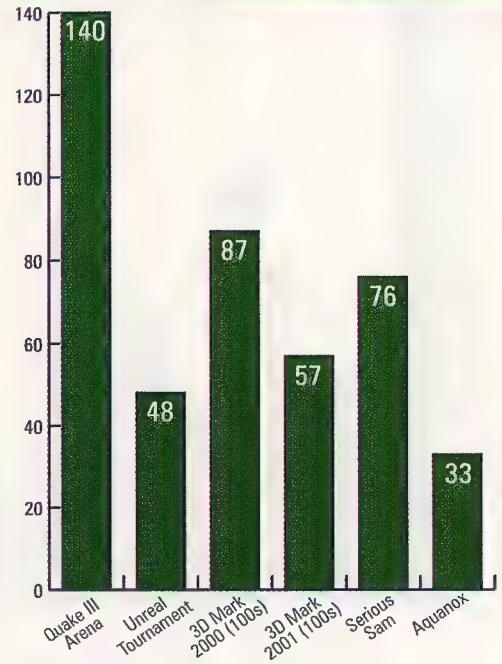
Talk about high end this machine has it all. The core is a 1.7 GHz Pentium 4 with 256MB of PC800 RDRAM stuffed into an ASUS P4T motherboard. For storage, two IBM Deskstar 40 GB drives at 7200 RPM are plugged into a Promise FastTrak IDE RAID controller. They re set in RAID 0 mode, which means the two hard drives are treated as one 80 GB drive by the controller, and it splits all data equally between the two. This results in a trade-off of speed for reliability the machine averages a full 10MB per second faster data transfer than a single IDE drive (that s about 25% faster), but if just one drive dies you lose all your data. If you ever consider a RAID 0 hard drive setup, backup often. Annoyingly, the drive was split into three partitions. The C: partition, named boot, only contained the swap file, which was fixed at 640 MB. Then there was a 10 GB WinMe partition that held just the Windows Millenium installation and standard stuff like the Program Files directory. Then there was another partition, labeled Games, for you-know-what, which was nearly 70 GB. Organization freaks may enjoy this type of setup, but multiple partitions on the same drive doesn t actually speed things up, and it makes it a pain to install programs when they want to head to the C: partition or Program Files directory on the D: partition, instead of the E: partition.

A Pioneer 16X DVD-ROM and top-notch Plextor 16X CD-RW drive round out the storage, and there s little to complain about on that front, at least after it was discovered that the system builders at GMachines hadn t enabled DMA on these drives, which is a serious oversight. That level of care might speak to other small issues with the machine, like the cabling inside. The cables are all tied together, but there s no real effort to bind them out of the way so it s easy to dig into your machine. Power cables hang down behind the drives instead of folded up near the top of the case, and where most manufacturers are now routing the CD audio cable around the case or down by the motherboard, GMachines just binds up the slack right there through the center of the case. It s not a god-awful mess or anything, but it s one of the less-neat interiors we ve seen on premium gaming PCs.

The charcoal gray aluminum case looks great, with a brushed-aluminum front face that GMachines has to paint the CD and floppy drives to match. Aluminum dissipates heat better than steel, too, but that s not likely to be a problem with this system. There are two fans sucking in air directly over the hard drives, a fan blowing air out in the back, and a fan blowing air out the top. The 21 Sony E500 monitor has a sharp picture and very flat screen, but it has an annoying tendency to show distorted colors in the lower corners until it warms up for an hour or so. It s certainly not worth the $770 GMachines charges for it. The Klipsch ProAudio 4.1 speakers, on the other hand, are worth every penny. They re connected to a decent Phillips Acoustic Edge sound card. A Logitech wireless keyboard and Razor Boomslang mouse (complete with nice Surface 1080 mouse pad) round out peripherals.

Performance is as good as you would expect, with the high-end Pentium 4 augmented by a Visiontek GeForce 3 card. The question is, is the performance good enough to warrant spending $2700 on a machine (without monitor or speakers)? You can save a couple hundred bucks opting out of the IDE RAID configuration, but that still doesn t get you near the $2000 price for a similarly configured Dell system (or equivalent). Paying a premium for specialty machines is worthwhile if the machines are meticulously constructed or include can t-find-elsewhere options, but that s not the case here. This is a fast machine with average construction quality that s overpriced, with little to show for it but a cool case. It s certainly not junk, but you can do better in the specialty gaming PC category. ●

BENCHMARKS



Benchmarks performed with vsync disabled, 32-bit color modes selected, and sound disabled. Quake 3 Arena used version 1.29f and the "four" demo, with all settings set to maximum and trilinear filtering enabled. Aquanox tests performed with the looping "Aquamark" demo test. Serious Sam scores reported are the "average without excessive peaks" value taken from the Karnak Peaceful Night Coop demo. Unreal Tournament was benchmarked using the UTBench test demo.

UPSIDE	Fast, nice case and cooling
DOWNSIDE	Expensive, average construction, annoying drive partitioning
RATING	★★★

Monsoon EGAD

Not life-changing, but very cool

by Jason Cross

MANUFACTURER Voodoo PC www.voodoopc.com
MSRP $2495 as reviewed ($2021 without monitor and speakers)

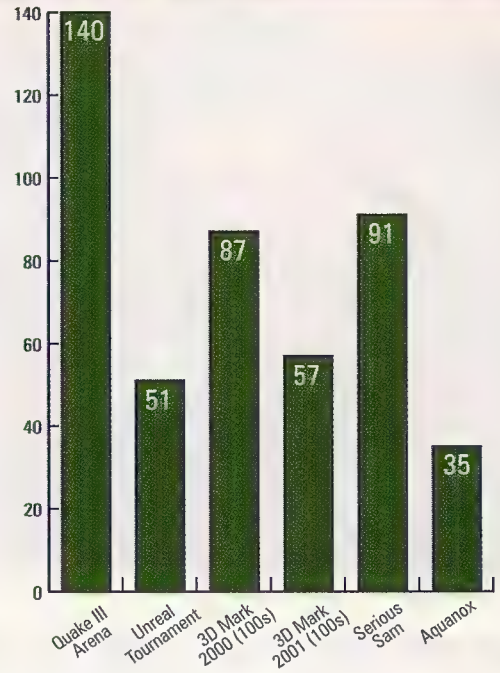
Canada-based Voodoo PC wants to make it clear that they re not just trying to take some cheap publicity off video cards popularized by the now-defunct 3dfx. They ve been operating under the Voodoo PC name since 1991, long before the deceased video card maker became a household name. You might not have heard of them before because they ve only been selling outside Canada in bulk for around two years. Their gaming line of computers, called EGAD for *Extreme Gaming And DVD*, is split into the AMD Monsoon line and the Intel Tsunami line. We re taking a look at a top-end system from the former.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

The test system was a 1.4 GHz Athlon with 128 MB of DDR RAM, a 40 GB IBM Deskstar 7200 RPM hard drive, and a 16X slot-loading Pioneer DVD-ROM. The motherboard is an ASUS A7M-266, the video card a Hercules 3D Prophet III, and the sound comes via Hercules Game Theater XP hooked up to Cambridge Soundworks FPS 2000 speakers. The test monitor was an exceptionally sharp and flat 19 Samsung Syncmaster 955DF. A Microsoft Internet Keyboard Pro and Intellimouse Explorer round out the package. It s all top-quality stuff worthy of any gaming enthusiast. After our review system was shipped, Voodoo PC changed suppliers of their GeForce3 cards to help meet demand now they come with Gainward s GeForce3, which adds video capture capabilities but otherwise performs the same. By default, Voodoo PC overclocks their GeForce3 cards. Ours was set at a core speed of 218 MHz and a memory speed of 483 MHz, up from the default of 200/460. We re assured they do this for every single customer buying an EGAD system and it s fully supported.

The system is exceptionally well built, with components securely installed and cables tied, folded, and hidden away so well you don t even notice most of them. Voodoo PC systems are backed by a standard 3-yr. parts and labor warranty that unfortunately does not include the cost of shipping the system back for repair. The company offers some nice perks, though. Their custom restore CD is better than what you get with most PCs. With it you can restore just Windows system files, back up your whole drive to a directory and restore your PC, or wipe the whole hard drive and return it to its original state. It ll even restore the BIOS to factory settings. A big black binder contains all the manuals for your components, their driver discs, etc. Another nice perk that comes with every Voodoo PC is what they call Lifetime Upgrade Insurance. For as long as you own the system, you can send it back to Voodoo PC to be upgraded. They ll charge you for shipping and a reduced rate for the parts, but not for labor, and they ll treat it like a new PC before they send it back to you. That means updating drivers such, a burn-in test period, and making a new recovery disk before sending it back.

BENCHMARKS



Benchmarks performed with vsync disabled, 32-bit color modes selected, and sound disabled. Quake 3 Arena used version 1.29f and the "four" demo, with all settings set to maximum and trilinear filtering enabled. Aquanox tests performed with the looping "Aquamark" demo test. Serious Sam scores reported are the "average without excessive peaks" value taken from the Karnak Peaceful Night Coop demo. Unreal Tournament was benchmarked using the UTBench test demo.

Our Monsoon EGAD performed remarkably well, but you d expect that from a 1.4 GHz Athlon with an overclocked GeForce3. It also just happens to look really cool, with a case with a huge lexan side window so you can see what s going on inside. Click a switch on the back and a little white light illuminates the inside of the case. The inside of the case is available in three colors: Porsche Black, Lamborghini Yellow, and Ferrari Red. They ve tossed in a GearGrip strap you wrap around your PC to carry it around easily and 25 of network cable. These are nice additions, but expensive. You can save $150 by opting for the case you can t see inside of. There s really little excuse for a computer this expensive to have only 128MB of RAM and the fun options that really make this system stand out cost a pretty penny, but those are really the only negative comments we have about this system.

The box the system came in claims that the contents of this box will change your life. Maybe that s hyperbole, but Voodoo PC has certainly put together a fine package for PC enthusiasts. ●

UPSIDE	Cool case, nice extras, top performance, well-built
DOWNSIDE	Pricey options, only 128MB RAM
RATING	★★★★½

Everyone attack that building.

Emperor: Battle for Dune

The grit and the glory

by Tom Chick

GENRE Twitchy Real-Time Strategy **DEVELOPER** Westwood Studios [www.westwood.ea.com] **PUBLISHER** EA Games [www.ea.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-4 players; Westwood Online; 2-8 players, Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen

When you go to the beach, you get sand everywhere. In your hair, your socks, your pants, the sandwich you were going to eat... it must be even worse on Dune, a whole planet full of sand. Perhaps this explains why *Emperor: Battle for Dune* has a grit-to-polish ratio of about 2 to 1. There are parts of *Emperor* that are smooth as slag, clear as glass—after all, Westwood's been making this game in some form or another for the last ten years. But then there's all that damn sand in the works, grinding, scraping, scratching, chafing over and over again in all the wrong places. Every time you thought you'd forgotten it, it's gotten into something else. It's in the interface, the unit balance, the graphics, the online support, it's everywhere, *scritch, scritch*. *Emperor* is a great day at the beach, but you come home with nothing to show for it but a mild burn and lots of sand down your underwear and you think, "I'll be damned if I ever go back *there*!"

Cue the Toto

Early on, *Emperor* is a bright, glorious real-time strategy game, tastefully drawn with a spiffy new 3D engine. Because you never have to fiddle with the camera, you never have to fight it. For all intents and purposes, *Emperor* is like a 2D game that just happens to use polygons. It is a little hardware intensive compared to Westwood's past products, but the average fan of the genre probably upgraded his or her rig somewhere back around the time of *Earth 2150* or *Sacrifice*.

Even with the detail turned down, *Emperor* is a gorgeous game, not so much because of any particle effects, hi-resolution textures, or dynamic lighting. Instead, it's gorgeous for being consistent and unique. This is art direction at its finest because it's odd and true, eschewing the typical game tendency to let a thousand styles bloom. Everything from the unit design to the uniform terrain to the cloying orange palette is drawn from the game world. Nothing is in here just because it "looks cool."

For instance, the ship that lands at a starport looks dopey and awkward, but it's directly from David Lynch's movie. Only a handful of fans will recognize this. The easier thing to do would have been for one of Westwood's artists to whip up a new spaceship, probably something like the dropship from *Aliens* or the Imperial shuttle from *Star Wars*. But *Emperor's* artists, bless them, are more faithful than flashy.

Orange Alert

It's a no-brainer to point out that *Emperor* isn't original. Once again, Westwood relies on the conventions they've been using to sell games since the first *Dune* RTS. The basics of the interface are the same. Many of the units are identical to their ten-year-old counterparts. There are even appearances from *Red Alert 2* characters thinly veiled in Dune garb; among *Emperor's* impressive spread of meticulously crafted units and counter-units, you'll find the equivalent of Cuban terrorists, Allied Harriers, and British snipers.

But to write off *Emperor* as a clone is to overlook some subtle and important new features. With fog of war and cloaking units, Westwood has given the gameplay a layer of reconnaissance and stealth. Players can choose sub-Houses to bring powerful trump units onto the field early on. These are units with the sorts of special abilities other games put at the far end of a long tech tree so they won't appear until the end game. Since these units aren't created in your regular base facilities, they can be built simultaneously with your main troops rather than in lieu of them. It makes for a lively and unpredictable mix of combatants. The game's sole resource, spice, is found only in the unsafe expanses of worm-infested sand, so each game plays like a battle across an archipelago of rock outcroppings. The goal is to secure the seas of sand between them. *Emperor* isn't just *Red Alert* in Fremen's clothing.

In a community theatre far, far away

One thing that hasn't changed is Westwood's ability to tell a story. As a narrative endeavor, *Emperor* is barely a notch above *Red Alert 2*, which is in turn a notch above Saturday morning cartoons. Like a flat rock on a pond,

RATINGS

Extraordinary	★★★★★
Excellent	★★★★☆
Maybe	★★★☆☆
Mediocre	★★☆☆☆
Contemptible	★☆☆☆☆

the script manages to skip across the highlights of the Dune world before rapidly sinking. Credit the writers, who certainly know the Dune books and movie, with more enthusiasm than the actors. Michael Dorn shows up to drop a few leaden line readings on his plate, his face frozen as if he were worried an expression might muss the Klingon make-up he's no longer wearing. Even veteran character actor Vincent Schiavelli can't quite muster the energy to be anything but fey. Of course, it doesn't help that he's playing opposite the Harkonnens, card-carrying members of the House of Embarrassing Overacting.

Part of the problem is that everything is performed in terrible earnest with a faux Shakespearean sensibility, in which the actors think silly dialogue is somehow ennobled if it's tinged with an accent. Part of the problem is the conspicuous blue screen technology, in which every backdrop screams "look at me, someone made me on a computer!" Part of the problem is that the production design is often chintzy when it's supposed to be epic; Westwood's idea of a Fremen army sweeping into battle is about twenty guys in fright wigs stumbling down a sandy incline. Part of the problem is that Westwood persists with the laughable device of having the actors talk at the camera as if the player were present. To be fair, this stuff must be compelling to twelve-year-olds, and someone deserves credit for the nifty costumes.

Far more interesting, and ultimately disappointing, is the single player campaign in which you conquer a map of Dune one territory at a time. Unfortunately, Westwood couldn't be bothered to provide a manual that explains how it works, so you might as well draw names from a hat when deciding where to attack next. But somehow concepts such as bases, reinforcements, counterattacks, reserve forces, and alliances are involved. It would probably be intriguing if you knew how it worked. Unfortunately, the difficultly level skyrockets during the last few missions and the campaigns are laced with Westwood's trademark maze and puzzle missions.

"Dune, where's my harvester?"

Another thing that hasn't changed is Westwood's refusal to minimize the player's workload. Their games are oblivious to this simple maxim: the most precious resource in a real-time strategy game is the player's attention. Once again, they expect you to fuss like a mother hen over dumb, wayward, meandering units. *Emperor* isn't about planning or strategy; like every other Westwood real-time strategy game it's about trying to be in two places at once to do ten things simultaneously. The worst thing about this "twitch strategy" approach is that it doesn't have to be this way. These are issues that have been solved in a hundred other games.

Why can't Westwood include unit order queuing? Or a functional waypoint system? Or units that respond when they're being attacked from outside their activation radius? Or formations that take advantage of the intricate unit balance? Or a command for a unit to stop moving and return fire if it's being attacked? Or the ability to jump to a message older than the most recent one? Or a mini map that can be used when you have units selected? Or an effective way to select and sort specific units? Or a counter for the time-honored Westwood cheese strategy of rushing with fast units that can fire while moving? And why, oh why, don't players have more control over spice harvesting, which is the basis for the economy and therefore the linchpin of the game's strategy? "He who controls the spice controls the universe." Yeah, yeah, right, but who can control the spice when you can't even control your own units?

Speaking of "your own units," you'll probably find some of them missing. For the first month of *Emperor's* release, Westwood cut out the game's air defense units, offering them only to people who pre-ordered from Babbages or Electronics Boutique. The rest of us are left wide open for aircraft rushes until Westwood patches the unit balance back into the game.

For better and worse, Westwood has done it again. With *Emperor*, they've created yet another stupendous sloppy sprawl of an RTS, a *Grand Guignol* of man, machine, and micromanagement, a juxtaposition of grit and glory that will have you whooping one moment, cursing it the next, and at last uninstalling it and forgetting it forever. There's an irony here far more dramatic than anything you'll see in *Emperor's* cutscenes: by their own arrogance, Westwood has undermined the best game they've ever made. Like sands through the hourglass, so goes another misguided Westwood spectacle.

UPSIDE	Westwood does it again
DOWNSIDE	Westwood does it again
RATING	★ ★

[left to right] There'll be blue birds over the green base of Ordos.

The considerate AI player sends in units one at a time so they're not too hard to destroy.

Diablo II: Lord of Destruction

What expansion packs are all about... or should be

by Cindy Yans

GENRE Action-RPG **DEVELOPER** Blizzard Entertainment [www.blizzard.com] **PUBLISHER** Vivendi Universal [www.vivendi.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 233, 64MB RAM; Macintosh G3 processor, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 Players; TCP/IP or Battle.net **ESRB** Mature

Act V is often snowy, and forefathers of the yeti group there.

It all started in 1997, in a little town called Tristram. Diablo, the large, red, horned, fearsome-but-constipated Lord of Terror wreaked havoc in the underbelly of this formerly quiet town, which contained a cathedral built over the monster-infested ruins of an ancient monastery. Blizzard Entertainment created a game with a whole new feel in *Diablo*, an action game that almost fooled you into thinking it was a role-playing game... almost.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Many fans played it day in and day out, often over and over again with different character classes, until the mere thought of the repetitive click-fest made them numb with "had-enough-ness." The announcement of its sequel whetted their peculiar appetites once more, however, resulting in an almost unprecedented number of pre-orders. Finally, in June 2000, *Diablo II* erupted onto the shelves to enormous popularity. In *Diablo II*, Blizzard expanded the areas around Tristram into four towns, each with numerous quests and enhancements of all kinds. We ventured through these areas in which lurked Diablo's Soulstone-mates—Mephisto, The Lord of Hatred, and Baal, The Lord of Destruction. Again, we lost hours and hours of fly-fishing and polo time vanquishing Mephisto and Diablo, but Baal, the last of the Prime Evils, remained unscathed. This year, his days are numbered.

This is the forest Prime Evil

Lord of Destruction is merely an expansion pack to *Diablo II* that offers the same type of hack-and-slash action. Or is it? It requires installation of the original game and invites you to either import your original characters, or to create new ones. Your characters must have completed *Diablo II*'s four acts before they may enter the new Act V, which begins in the city of Harrogath.

In many areas, strange teleport devices bring you to even stranger lands.

Baal has returned to the Barbarian Highlands of the north, and with him has come a vast Army of Destruction. Their intent is to corrupt the Worldstone—the only thing protecting the entire mortal plane from time-share communities.

While most would agree that *Diablo II* is a bit behind the times in the level of its graphics quality, *Lord of Destruction* brings the world into much clearer focus with the ability to use 800 by 600 resolution. It's not state of the art by any means, but that doesn't matter as the look is crisper, cleaner, and sharper, and the seamless areas (which have always looked good) are even more beautiful than ever. The wider scope that the higher resolution adds more of a "not if I see you first" twist to combat.

In addition to the ubiquitous Deckard Cain, last of the Horadrim, Harrogath has five more denizens that are more than willing to attend to all of your shopping, repair, hiring, and gambling needs. Conversation choices and dialogue are as sparse and limited as ever, but this game is not about gathering information from NPCs. In fact, if you're progressing for the third or fourth time through the first four acts, you'll probably not even stop to listen.

It ain't no Hellfire

After the furor over the original *Diablo* waned, a lot of folks were surprised to see that Blizzard handed over the rights to do an add-on to its stellar title to Synergistic Software. *Hellfire* proved to be a rather pale expansion—single-player only, adding two new areas to the single town of Tristram, and offering a few new monsters, items, and the Monk character class. It did revive interest in the product for a while, but it played exactly the same. People almost immediately hacked it to add multiplayer support (but were not able to do so on Battle.net, Blizzard's free Internet server). Many people were forced to play the new areas solo, however, and a significant portion of *Diablo* fans didn't even bother.

Lord of Destruction is an entirely different story. This may be, hands down, the most definitive add-on to any game on record. It rivals other products whose expansions actually improved on the quality of the original game—games such as *Age of Empires: The Conquerors* and, to a lesser extent, Blizzard's own *StarCraft: Brood Wars*.

The wish list and then some

Blizzard listened carefully to its player base. It hard-wired multiplayer ladder champions and casual players alike to its in-house think tank and uploaded their ideas as they slept. It pondered many suggestions and discarded many others and came up with a pile of enhancements that most will agree add brand new life to *Diablo II*.

This is not "Just Another Act." The additions are patched right into the main game so that all five Acts benefit from the makeover. And what a makeover it is, lifting almost all of the tedium-providers, and adding enough interesting things so that even if you've played the original to absolute death, there is enough to suck you right back in for more.

They've supplemented the normal translucent map overlay with an upper corner mini-map mode in case the former becomes distracting. It works very well, especially after you become familiar with an area.

The twice-as-large stash cache (your item storage chest) is wonderful, giving you a lot more time to decide what you want to keep and what you don't, which is especially important now, since the thousands of new items—including the equipment-enhancing jewels and runes—present seemingly never-ending possibilities.

Some seemingly innocuous but certainly annoying activities have disappeared: the tedious buy-a-potion, place-the-potion, buy-a-potion, place-the-potion activity owes its demise to the ctrl-right-click purchase option. The click-repair, click-broken-time-one-at-a-time yawner was replaced a Repair All button.

How did you ever live without the dual-weapon configuration, allowing a switch between not only melee and range weapons (or melee and melee for hand-to-hand fighters), but the spell keys associated with each? This feature gives your character much more strategic combat capability, along with *sixteen* (instead of eight) hotkeys for spells and skills.

Mercenaries that you can now equip and heal have exceptionally helpful AI, unlike the original, and now neither they nor your summoned creatures can block you into certain death situations. They gain levels along with you, and you can transport them from act to act. Add to these the new Assassin and Druid character classes (rounding the total number up to seven), and you have one heck of a versatile monster thump.

Here a patch, there a patch...

Probably the most impressive aspect of gameplay to which Blizzard has (and continues to) dedicated its resources is the balance between skills, items, spells, and characters. While single-player fans still have to re-clear spawning monsters after saving and exiting (one complaint about the original game), they will undoubtedly appreciate the enhancements and play-balancing issues from the numerous patches applied to this product. Single shmingle, though; it is evident that the developers are absolutely devoted to making this the definitive multiplayer action-RPG to date. They've succeeded.

Since the original release of *Diablo II*, during the expansion beta test period, and even after *Lord of Destruction* was finally on the retail shelf, Blizzard has applied numerous patches to the product. Developers have been carefully tweaking statistic after statistic, making sure that no character class had an unfair advantage over another, and that the skill trees (progressive categorized lists of combat and magical skills) made sense.

Baal sends out many minions before allowing you to reach his chamber.

Of course some players who imported their original characters to the expansion are up in arms about not being able to change their character and skill point allocations, shouting things like "d0oD, I built my Barbarian the way I did *because* of the way the skill balance was." They have a point, but the new *Diablo II* is so saturated with special items that rebalancing should not be an issue.

Socketed items (up to six slots per piece) hold gems, runes, *and* jewels now, which really helps character balance without having to min-max your character's skill stats—not to mention the number of rare and unique items that also help. Additionally, the Horadric Cube (aside to Deckard Cain: one more suggestion out of you, old man, and I'll tell you where you can put that Horadric Cube) allows for an amazing array of crafted items when you insert and combine almost every item type in the game. Tons of "recipes" for these combinations appeared online even before the game's release. You can use these or experiment—try a "Zod" rune, a cracked cap, and Wirt's leg, for example.

Destroy Baal today

Blizzard's Battle.net servers have been a lot more cooperative during the launch of the expansion than they were during the launch of the original game. The ubiquitous "you have been disconnected" message is sometimes an issue, but not nearly as often as it was during last summer's bottleneck. Battle.net can even be downright pleasant these days if you can avoid the KewlDudez.

$35 retail (on average) may seem like a lot to pay for an expansion pack. In this instance it's not, since you're really getting an amazingly reworked masterpiece and not just "a few more levels." Hopefully Blizzard will continue to keep the game under its balancing wing.

UPSIDE	Amazing enhancements to the original, stunning higher-resolution graphics, singularly innovative play balancing
DOWNSIDE	Less robust single-player game, causes sleep deprivation
RATING	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

World War II Online: Blitzkrieg

What if they gave a war and it didn t work yet?

by Tom Chick

GENRE Online Role-playing/Sim/Strategy **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **DEVELOPER** Cornered Rat Software [www.corneredrat.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** Internet only **ESRB** Teen

World War II *Online* is the authentic recreation of certain aspects of World War II: confusion, poor intelligence, sudden death, plodding marches, tedious flights, bugs, poor frame rates, crashing servers, intolerable load times. Okay, maybe those last few weren t parts of the war, but you d never know based on how prevalent they are in *World War II Online*.

Quite simply, this is a game that just doesn t work.

Flying escort for a Ju-88 Stuka.

A convoy is threatened by an enemy Spitfire lining up for a strafing run.

Strategy First calls it a persistent massively multiplayer game that combines elements of first person, strategy, and role-playing games. The idea is that you buy the $40 boxed retail game and then pony up $10 a month as a subscription fee. In exchange, you can be an infantryman, a tank, a fixed gun, an airplane, or even a truck driver when the German blitzkrieg rolls into France and Belgium in 1940. As territory and important structures change hands, an elaborate strategic model determines a set of missions. Bomb Merbes, attack Spontin, defend Namur. That sort of thing. By joining other players in these missions, you earn ranks and eventually can plan your own missions to help shape the outcome of the war.

Gang aft a-gley

That s the idea anyway. Strategy First may as well sell a box of rocks with instructions for players to take the rocks into a field and throw them at each other. At least it would work as advertised, unlike *World War II Online*, which has little claim to being massive, persistent, strategic, or role-playing. As of this writing, and a full three weeks after the game s release, these elements are AWOL. The monthly subscription fee is not yet in effect either, but you ve already handed over $40. Strategy First calls this phase boot camp, which is apparently a euphemism for you pay and we let you beta test it.

Instead of one massive and persistent world, the game is splintered into about a half-dozen servers, which aren t so much massively multiplayer as just bigger than your average *Tribes* game. Log on at noon and Andenne is under French control. Log on an hour later and you might not be able to get into that server. Or maybe it s reset and Andenne is a German base. Or, more likely, you probably forgot what server you were on because the labels are constantly changing. Yesterday s Server #3 isn t necessarily today s Server #3. Because of this constant state of flux, *World War II Online* has more in common with first person shooters like *Quake*, which jump from server to server with aplomb, than massively multiplayer games like *EverQuest*, in which the appeal is to have some effect on the world. When you play *World War II Online*, you go to gain a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name. So much for persistence.

The strategic layer that is supposed to drive the war effort is missing, so players generally just attack air bases. Cities and factories are supposed to create the resource points stored in depots and shuffled around with convoys, but none of this is in the game. The servers are supposed to track your performance and award ranks based on your participation in missions, which would account for the claims to role-playing elements. But none of this is in the game. Not only will your strategic accomplishments be reset every time a server burps, but your personal accomplishments aren t even noted. Did you get that kill? Did someone else? How many times have you died? Was that mission successful? Is your track record better against German Panzers or French Chars? How many Spitfires or Junkers have you shot down? How many buildings have you captured? None of this is in the game. You are the unknown and unknowing soldier.

Beta testing war is hell

At least you can jump in and shoot at other people. But then there s the fact that it doesn t even work very well as a game. It s shot through with conspicuous glitches. A French flag flies over a German building. Dawn hiccups and turns into night for a few minutes every morning. Sometimes, you simply won t be allowed into a game. The load times are horrible, particularly considering that the graphics don t even look very good. And for graphics this under-whelming, they re surprisingly slow once they do load. *World War II Online* is a resource hog, hungry for processing power and RAM and not even very well optimized for any particular graphics card. Frame rates plummet when they re most important, such as when you re in a dogfight or when you re fighting in the confines of a town.

The developers have saddled *World War II Online* with a whole slew of bad design choices. The map view shows very little helpful information and sometimes doesn t even display town names. A better map view, or a simple printed map in the manual, would help players find their way around and communicate with each other. A cramped chat window fills with dialogue and quickly scrolls off screen.

There s very little feedback about the things you need to know. Instead, there s the bewildering sense that you have to guesstimate or figure things out the hard way. This makes it really tricky to play *World War II Online* as a flight sim. The view system has no padlock, no rear view, and no indicator when an enemy plane leaves the tiny cone of your front view. There s a heads up display common to all the vehicles that shows your health, stamina, and heading. When you re in a tank or gun, it also gives information about how much ammo you have left. But why doesn t it display basic information about how fast you re going in an airplane, what gear you re in when you re driving a tank, or which weapons you re carrying when you re an infantryman? Why do you have to constantly glance down at your tachometer to drive?

Moving into a valley at dusk.

Why not give the player some indication when he s successfully hitched to a gun so he doesn t spend ten minutes wrestling with the lack of a rear or external view and chatting with the gun operator? Are you hooked up? I don t know, drive away and I ll let you know. Are you still there? No, I came loose and I m rolling downhill. When carrying troops, there s no indication whether you actually have people riding with you. Is there anyone back there? Should I go or wait? These are crucial parts of the game that need to be made simple so people will do them. Instead, they are frustrating and complex, so screw it, you might as well just drive a tank.

Tankers paradise

That s the current state of *World War II Online* as a game. Everyone s driving a tank. The frame rates and lack of situational awareness are a problem if you want to fly a plane. The difficulty of getting towed is a problem if you want to be a gun emplacement. There s very little mano-a-mano shooting, so that s a problem if you want to be infantry. There s always demand for truck drivers, but then, well, you re a truck driver.

One of the most infuriating things about *World War II Online* is that it s not hard to see the game it s trying to be, and that seems like a great game. Because it supposedly supports gameplay on scales ranging from bombers to infantrymen, there s a great combined arms concept at work here. Fighters claim the skies, bombers soften up the targets, gun emplacements defend against tanks, tanks clear the way for infantry, and infantry ride in and claim the territory. What a glorious idea for a game. If only it worked better. If only the strategic elements were in place. If only your stats were tracked. If only the interface was more manageable. If only the graphics weren t so slow and ugly. If only, if only. *World War II Online* is a box full of if only.

There s no denying that massively multiplayer games are perpetually works in progress, continually evolving. In light of this, *World War II Online* has promise. But there s also no denying that this game was released far too early and has no business sitting on retail shelves wearing a $40 price tag as if it were finished. On one level, what you have here is a buggy multiplayer tank sim. Hop in, sling some AP rounds, and have a ball. But on a much more important level, what we have here is a minor atrocity that belongs next to Sierra s *Outpost*, Take Two s *Battlecruiser 3000 A.D.*, and Microprose s *Falcon 4* in the annals of computer gaming.

UPSIDE	A great concept for a massively multiplayer online game...
DOWNSIDE	...that doesn't work yet
RATING	★

Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal

Just in case 200 hours of Baldur's Gate II wasn't enough

by David Ryan Hunt

GENRE Role-playing **DEVELOPER** BioWare [www.bioware.com] **PUBLISHER** Black Isle Studios [www.blackisle.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Baldur's Gate II **MULTIPLAYER** 2-6 players (Internet, LAN); 2 players (Modem) **ESRB** Teen

The original Baldur's Gate and its progeny deserve all the widespread critical acclaim they have received. Through *Tales of the Sword Coast* and *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, the "Child of Bhaal" saga follows the plight of your character and the battle with destiny established in the first game. *Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal* concludes the epic story in a satisfactory, if not spectacular, fashion.

As one of the most powerful of Bhaal's children, you find yourself drawn into a war against the Five—a group of powerful Bhaalspawn who seek the destruction of anyone with the tainted blood of the God of Murder flowing in their veins. Over the course of the struggle your hero uncovers a lot of past history, which is where *Throne of Bhaal* ties in the story from *Baldur's Gate*. The story arc feels more like a compacted sequel rather than an expansion pack, but the second half is predictable and the ending is not quite satisfactory for a story of this magnitude. You have a choice of two paths, but neither one results in a conclusion that measures up to the epic scope of the rest of the story. No music plays when the credits scroll, and it feels a bit empty.

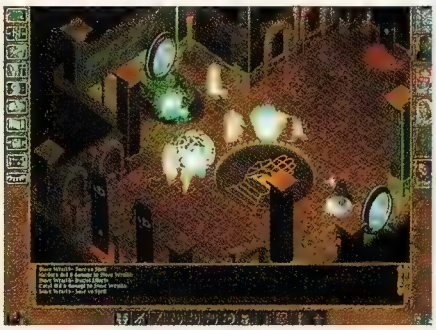
Finale aside, *Throne of Bhaal* delivers the goods. It comes with more gameplay than you'd expect from an expansion, even if it seems small next to the massive scope of *Shadows of Amn*. There are plenty of side-quests and one satisfyingly long one called Watcher's Keep. In addition to offering a sizeable, multi-floored dungeon housing powerful enemies, it also has its own little plot that emerges as you try to reach the Imprisoned One, an unknown entity sealed within the Keep. Although it is purely optional, Watcher's Keep provides a few days worth of entertainment on its own, although the reward for beating the Keep could be a little more substantial.

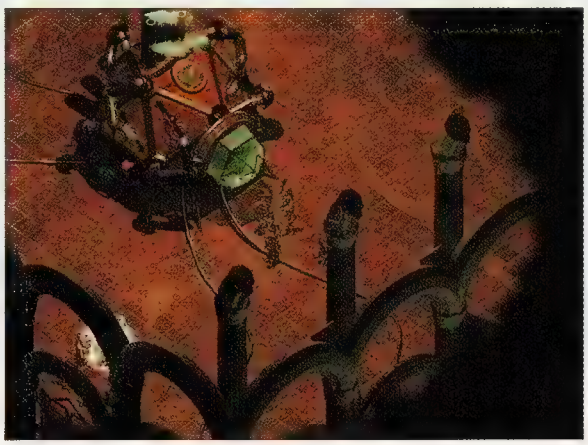
Unlike *Shadows of Amn*, the path you follow is relatively linear and the story moves along at a brisk pace. Since your characters attain god-like power, the actual game is a long string of boss fights, and the designers don't hold back. At the beginning you are powerful, but before long your characters would be able to crush their original selves. The game does a good job reminding you of how powerful you are, too. For example, if you tell a particular Lich that you are going to kill it, the response is that it *knows* you will win the battle. After all, an ordinary Lich is a relatively scrawny opponent for characters with your powers.

Depending on your class, you get to pick new special abilities every level after 18-24. These abilities range from powerful skills to level 10 spells for mages and level 8 spells for priests. Thieves can take Assassination, which lasts for one combat round and upgrades every successful strike to a backstab for that round. Fighters have a similar ability with critical hits. Some abilities increase your defenses, magic resistance, or attacks per round while others give you special powers. Mages get powerful spells such as Dragon's Breath, a 20d10 fireball that knocks back opponents and does not harm party members. They can also summon Planetars, powerful avatars who are capable combatants and spellcasters, capable of raising the dead, healing and casting offensive spells. It seems that nearly every new skill and ability is designed to remind you of how god-like your character has become, and it's oddly (or perhaps not so oddly) entertaining.

Unfortunately for pure priests and mages, they will max out in abilities. Combat-classes can keep picking the same abilities, allowing multiple uses each day, so they do not have the same problem.

Between the new abilities, areas and quests, increased experience cap, and a new kit (the Wild Mage), *Throne of Bhaal* adds just about everything you could want in an expansion. With a more spectacular ending it could have been the expansion pack to end all expansions packs; as it stands it's a must-buy for fans of the series.





[clockwise from upper left] Spell effects fill the screen with almost every fight; Judging from this machine, Lum the Mad is, uhm, mad; Dragon's Breath works wonders when you're in a jam; If an NPC goes to check on something, you know he's going to die.

UPSIDE	Expanded world, lots of cool new items, upgrading artifacts, big fights, new skills and spells.
DOWNSIDE	Even with 2,000,000 experience, new characters are weaker than imported characters; a lackluster finale.
RATING	★★★★

If you played the first game, you won't want to check out any books here.

Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare

Edward Carnby returns in a thriller that lives up to its prestigious name

by Brett Todd

GENRE Action/Adventure DEVELOPER Darkworks/Spiral House [www.darkworks-studio.com & www.spiralhouse.co.uk] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

Supernatural sleuth Edward Carnby steals back to the PC for the first time since 1995 in *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare*, the fourth entry in the groundbreaking series that basically invented the survival horror genre. Although it was left to console giant Capcom to spin this winning concept into gold, it all started with Carnby. His explorations of Derceto Mansion in 1993 set the stage for all that followed, from *Resident Evil* s walking dead through *Dino Crisis* hungry velociraptors.

It s good to have him back. Perhaps a little surprisingly, given the way that survival horror has assumed the posture of the proverbial dead horse of late, Carnby s *New Nightmare* is great fun. Ghost stories never really go out of style, particularly when they re told in such a bewitching fashion.

While Carnby has been moved from the 1920s to the present and given a nice mane of John Romero-esque hair, both he and Aline Cedrac, the other principal character that you can choose to play, have distinct personalities. Carnby is a pulp hero, albeit one who s freely able to mutter a dejected Shit when confronted by a particularly tough creature, and Cedrac uses false bravado to counter any assumptions that she s scared to death which of course she really is.

Cedrac has every right to be scared, too, as the curtain opens with the crash of her plane en route to forbidding Shadow Island. Even though both she and Carnby manage to escape the plummeting aircraft, their situation goes from bad to worse when their parachutes get separated. Carnby ends up in a swamp and Cedrac lands on the roof of an ancient pile that serves as the ancestral home of the Morton family, known for its fortune, obsession with the occult, and potential involvement in the recent murder of Carnby s best friend. Once more, you re left alone in the dark and with a mystery to solve.

Gameplay is a timeworn mix of third-person action and adventure, with a welcome lean towards the latter. Unlike recent survival horror efforts like the execrable *Evil Dead: Hail to the King*, it focuses on exploration rather than repetitive combat. Throughout the game, your protagonist creeps through shadowy, decrepit rooms, discovering the mysteries of Shadow Island with nary a beastie in sight. You solve numerous enigmas, collect a host of odd and arcane objects, face off against the odd sharp-toothed threat, and research the history of the Morton family in various documents. All of this is firmly in the tradition of the original *Alone in the Dark*, right down to the manner in which picked-up items rotate on the screen. Trigger-happy gamers fed a steady diet of Umbrella Corporation zombies might find this a little slow, but most should appreciate the change of pace and the emphasis on spooks over shotgun blasts. Unfortunately, this mood is abandoned for the final sequences of the game, which simultaneously rips off H.R. Giger and assails you with dozens of respawning monsters. About the only thing that makes this section enjoyable is its ease. You re provided with an outstanding arsenal of weapons, so feel free to open up on the endless stream of nasties with everything you ve got.

Visually, every nook and cranny insidiously whispers haunted house, from the second floor landing with the eerie portraits to the voluminous library jammed with occult knowledge and Morton family secrets. Part of this uncanny charm is added by Carnby s ever-present flashlight, which is used to great effect throughout his investigations.

Your eyes have a better time with *The New Nightmare* than your ears, though. The quality of the voice acting is up and down, with the leads often not doing justice to a very smart script. The predominant track is a techno number that sounds an awfully lot like something written by Moby on the morning after an all-night rave. With the exception of the shadowy scorpions, monsters generally lack identifiable audio characteristics.

Unlike so many attempts to revive gaming characters and franchises from the past, Infogrames, Darkworks, and Spiral House have put together something very special with *The New Nightmare*. Old timers who fondly remember their foray into Derceto Mansion can enjoy a walk down memory lane, while newcomers can delight in thrills and chills to rival anything that *Resident Evil* and its many clones have to offer.

UPSIDE	Revisits themes from the original and adds fresh twists from newer survival horror games
DOWNSIDE	Umpteen Resident Evil clones have sucked some of the life out of this genre
RATING	★ ★ ★ ★

The city level looks great, complete with explosions and weather.

Gangsters 2: Vendetta

Hothouse returns to the streets in a lukewarm sequel

by William Abner

GENRE Real-Time Strategy **DEVELOPER** Hothouse [www.hothouse.org] **PUBLISHER** Eidos [www.eidos.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 266, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 players; Internet, LAN, modem **ESRB** Teen

The original *Gangsters* was a promising, complex game ruined by an obtuse and ill-conceived interface. There was a fun game buried underneath the minutia—you just had to find it. *Gangsters 2* strips away the micromanagement and improves the interface but also strips away what made the original compelling in the first place. It's upsetting to see the richness of the first game made watered-down and restrictive.

You play the role of Joey Bane, and another mob family has murdered your father. The entire game is your quest for revenge: to kill the murderer of your pop and take over the underworld in your state. You do this by adding gangsters to your "family" roster, hiring muscle to defend businesses, expanding your territory, bribing officials, stocking up on weapons, and blowing the hell out of the enemy hoodlums. The gangsters in your crew vary in skill and expertise; one might be an explosives expert while the other might be a safe-cracker. Adding a nice role-playing twist, you can improve the skills of your mobsters as time goes on, if they stay alive.

Make no mistake about it—*Gangsters 2* is more of a strategy-action hybrid than its predecessor. Territory changes hands multiple times in a 24-hour period and mobsters draw steel more often then Sonny Corleone in a bad mood. There are more murders and drive by shootings committed in the fictional state of New Temperance than in Illinois of the 1920's. It's more dangerous than Detroit. It's almost as if every linear mission (of which there are 20) is trying to recreate the final scenes from The Godfather. The body count piles up the more you play as the levels get bigger and the mobsters nearly outnumber the citizens. Each mission has a specific main goal that, once met, ends the mission. So if you are in a hot gun battle with a rival Boss, and the primary goal is to kill him, the level ends as soon as he dies, even though his men may have you surrounded.

Hothouse makes the game much easier to play by improving the interface and removing much of the original game's complexity. No longer do you issue orders on a weekly basis to all of your thugs in turned based fashion, rather the game plays out in a 24-hour real-time day/night cycle, complete with changing weather patterns. You issue orders to your men just like a real-time strategy game (thankfully you can pause the action and still issue orders). For example, if Vinnie "The Pimp" is relaxing in your hotel HQ, you can click on him and tell him to go wax an enemy hood or blow up an enemy business, and he'll run out of the office with shotgun (or dynamite) in hand. Sound simple? It is.

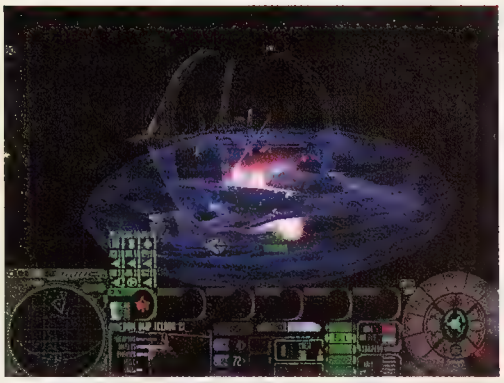
The biggest shortcoming by far is the AI, however. The mobsters are as dumb as stumps. Granted, most mob soldiers aren't too bright, but you'd think that they know when a car does a "drive by" not to stand around and wait for it to make another pass. Ironically, it's an improvement over the AI in the first game—it's just not enough of an improvement.

The game sports sharp graphics in the city level. Everything looks like a bustling city circa 1920, which adds much to the atmosphere. The problem is that you spend most of your time looking at the overhead map of the city. Peppered with green dots that represent your mobsters and yellow dots that represent the enemy, this view is a lot less attractive but gives you a much more useful view of the action. It's just too difficult to play the game at the city level most of the time, which is a shame because it's not as fun watch the dots fight it out.

Gangsters 2 isn't a bad game, and you get the feeling that there is a great game just dying to get out—but if you were hoping for a fine tuned version of the original, you're going to be disappointed.

Most of the game is played looking at this screen. It's not as pretty but at least you can issue orders quickly.

UPSIDE	Good graphics, multiplayer spawns off one CD, interface is improved over the original
DOWNSIDE	Gameplay is monotonous, not nearly as deep or as interesting as the original game, suspect AI
RATING	★★½



[left to right] Deep Space Nine, Worf, and Wormhole. Jem'Hadar versus Deep Space Nine.

Deep Space Nine: Dominion Wars

I dunna think she's finished, Captain!

by Andrew S. Bub

GENRE Real-time Strategy **DEVELOPER** Gizmo Games [www.gizmogames.com] **PUBLISHER** Simon & Schuster Interactive [www.simonsays.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 266, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

"The Dominion War" was a plotline that stretched and coiled around *Deep Space Nine's* television run. It was a full-scale bonafide *Star Trek* war, with multiple fronts, betrayals, espionage, new technologies and the best looking Trek starship combat ever put to film (well, video). The short of it goes like this: an evil empire called the Dominion lives in the Gamma Quadrant. The Klingons, humans, etc., live in the Alpha Quadrant. Deep Space Nine (a space station) guards a wormhole between the quadrants. The Dominion manipulates the Cardassians into helping them attack our more favorite Trek races (Klingons, The Federation and, in a small way, the Romulans). Colorful lights and explosions ensue. It's perfect fodder for a video game and *Deep Space Nine* license holder Simon & Schuster Interactive were smart to exploit it, especially after the minor critical success that was their third-person *Deep Space Nine* romp of late last year, *The Fallen*. Too bad they didn't finish it.

This real-time strategy game looks like a third-person space shooter but it isn't. The default camera view is over the shoulder but your job isn't to unleash volleys of weaponry yourself (a la *Starfleet Command*), you have to point and click. Order your fleet to boldly go there, shoot that, engage and make it so. It's sort of light on the strategy, but the tradeoff is that *Dominion Wars* looks and feels really good. The camera (which you control) lets you see the damage and combat from all sides. Wounded ships sputter and limp leaking colorful plasma clouds, and soon blackened and burning hulks drift across the star field. Very cool stuff. Especially when you've got Deep Space Nine itself—or some similar landmark—in the background.

The interface is simple enough. Click on the screen or on a mini-map to move ships around. Group fleets together with the keyboard, manage subsystems with tiny buttons, and rotate the camera with the right mouse button to view the action from any angle. Double clicking on the ship icon centers you right behind that ship, if you get lost or confused.

Success at previous missions earns you Command Points that you can spend on ships, captains, special weapons and specialist crew (a fleet contains up to six ships). Does the next mission call for brute force? Then you might want to 'buy' a Galaxy Class ship this time and an experienced captain. Does boarding play a role? Then grab more security commandos. Need to be stealthy? Then stock your fleet with swift and cloaking device-enabled Klingon Birds of Prey (B'rel Class) or something similar. There are two campaigns: one for The Federation and Klingons and the other for the Cardassians and Jem'Hadar. The missions are puzzle-like and often needlessly difficult, but they also contain a sense of sustained battle and urgency.

As a nice value-added gimmick Simon & Schuster threw in their *Starship Creator Warp II* software toy, which lets you create your own vessels and captains, the game even lets you transfer them and use them in the game. There are a handful of multiplayer games included, including a deathmatch/free for all mode (for up to eight people) and an interesting variant in which you have to scan enemy ships searching for changeling Founders to capture. As of this writing, even with the 1.02 patch multiplayer is laggy and connections are tenuous, even on a broadband connection.

Overall, the game feels unfinished. It's unstable and is fraught with every kind of bug imaginable. It crashes seemingly at random, it won't run with some common programs running in the background, and sometimes won't run at all for unknown reasons. It doesn't recognize cordless mice as input devices. Save games often don't work, and sometimes they load a previous game when you were trying to save. Since you can't choose or verify a video card, or switch from the default 800 by 600 resolution (there are sometimes severe anti-aliasing problems), you can never be sure if your fancy video card is working well at all. To top it off, the tutorials are bland non-interactive short films and the manual is a mere pamphlet.

Underneath all the bugs, *Dominion Wars* is a solid real-time strategy/action hybrid game that would be easy to recommend to fans of space combat or *Star Trek*. But it barely gets out of space dock and is sadly saddled with a potentially fatal warp core breach. Prepare to beam up multiple patches, Captain.

UPSIDE	A visually stirring Star Trek strategic adventure.
DOWNSIDE	Fraught with bugs and driver problems of all descriptions.
RATING	★★½

Microsoft Train Simulator

Won't find no hobos ridin' these rails

by Scott Udell

The external views really show off the environments. Can you tell where the world ends?

GENRE Simulation **DEVELOPER** Kuju Entertainment [www.kuju.com] **PUBLISHER** Microsoft [www.microsoft.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 266, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

While there have been many games that let you drive a train, it's taken a company like Microsoft to bring such a simulation to the big time. You might expect the king of the commercial aviation simulation world to lavish similar attention on mode of transportation perhaps even more beloved than flight, and you wouldn't be wrong... at least, not entirely.

The settings for the game are wonderful, and are one of its greatest strengths. There are six real-world routes: two in the U.S., two in Europe, and two in Japan, and all feel quite different. The routes in the game can reach well over 100 miles in length, and every foot of that length is lovingly modeled, with terrain, vegetation, and man-made objects abounding in astonishing and apparently accurate variety. Even better, the environments are quite seamless—while you know you're just moving along a narrow corridor of modeled terrain, with the detail cranked you'll never be able to tell.

The game places you in the cab of one of nine locomotives: two coal-fired steam, three diesel-electrics, and four electrics. There are plenty of rail cars, and they look superb, but they're so many sheep to your locos' shepherd. Each locomotive is modeled in wonderful detail, both in terms of the visuals and the simulation. You're given detailed cockpit treatments that look nice and work well. The different types of locomotive are very apparent—if you didn't realize how much more complex the operation of a steam loco was than a modern one, you will now—but there are even obvious differences in the look and operational feel of engines within a particular class—there's no generic feel here. There is a price to this realism. While the game works great on a high-end Pentium III (albeit with microscopic pauses), it chugs on a 450 MHz Pentium II, and would probably choke on the minimum-spec machine Microsoft lists on the box.

In addition to the real-world instruments each train comes with Microsoft has added several "driving aids" that are much appreciated. One that is sorely missed is an inclinometer, to tell you whether you're engine is going up or down hill—it can hard to tell from the visuals, and that vagueness will be one of your chief difficulties in controlling any of these trains.

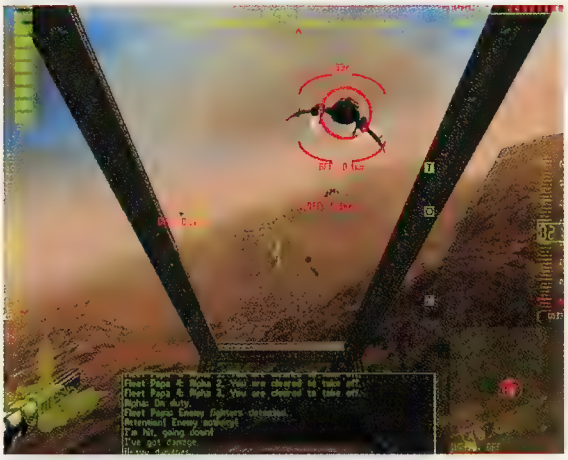
In addition to three general tutorials, each route has a freeform mode and a route-specific tutorial. Much of the gameplay is in the activities, specific scenarios where you must accomplish set goals. Activities usually involve moving freight or passengers, but they can also task you with swapping out cars in your train or forming "consists" for other trains. Like the routes, the activities are varied, and can be very fun to tackle, but unfortunately there just aren't enough of them. Many of the activities are short (20 minutes or less), so even with replay you'll probably tire of them quickly. An editor allows you to build more activities but given the complexity of the tools, more should have been provided.

Then there's the rather nebulous issue of atmosphere. The environments you drive through are quite attractive, but generally empty feeling. There's no real sense of human activity to your world, aside from moving cars—no people in the stations, no chatter of excited travelers or exasperated employees, no hobos, and no sense of connection to the larger world of train operations. The presentation of the activities can be dry. If there's been a murder on my Orient Express, some voiceover from the investigating detective would've been nice, but instead your instructions are presented in uninspiring text. Generally you feel like you run your route and that's it. After it ends, you just move to another encapsulated experience. There's no... gestalt to it all.

You might be asking, "well, is this a role-playing game or a simulation?" and that's a valid question. But sims are role-playing games, in a way, and trains in particular cry out for a full-bodied treatment of that role-playing. Make no mistake—*Microsoft Train Simulator* is a good and enjoyable first step even in this 1.0 version, and you can expect that both its creator and the dedicated fans will help advance it. But at this point it's better sampled in small doses, because for now that's all you have.

Here's a rare event—seeing another train along the way.

UPSIDE	Good atmosphere, relatively slick simulation, beautiful environments
DOWNSIDE	Not enough scenarios, high system requirements, minimal printed documentation
RATING	★★★½



Locked in a furball in a Tempest fighter.

Echelon

A space-sim goes to ground

by Nick McElveen

GENRE Sci-Fi Simulation **DEVELOPER** Buka Entertainment [www.buka.ru] **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Software [www.bethsoft.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-16 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

By taking what would otherwise be a solid traditional space-sim and giving it a planet-side setting, *Echelon* makes a novel contribution to the not-quite-flight-sim genre. This sub-genre, perhaps best exemplified by *Crimson Skies*, keeps the veneer of flight and traditional dogfighting while in essence eliminating such inconveniences as gravity and aerodynamics. If you can avoid flying into the ground, *Echelon* offers entertaining action piloting futuristic thruster-propelled aircraft in a sharp 3D environment.

For the most part, *Echelon's* aircraft rely on a multitude of thrusters rather than airfoils and control surfaces to stay aloft and maneuver, and the feel of piloting them falls somewhere between the experience of a hovercraft, an airplane, and a helicopter. The *Echelon* aircraft fit into three categories: fighters, assault planes, and interceptors. The fighters are the most nimble, and are capable of both quickly accelerating and decelerating to a mid-air hover. Lateral thrusters permit them to make quick turns at low speeds, though the limited range of most of the game's weaponry usually necessitates a painful trade-off of maneuverability for speed.

In exchange for more armor and weapon hard-points, assault planes give up maneuverability at higher speeds almost entirely. Finally, interceptors are the only craft similar to traditional fixed-wing aircraft, needing to maintain a minimum forward velocity to stay airborne. Interceptors are able to fly at much higher speeds and are very stealthy, making them powerful reconnaissance aircraft.

The futuristic offensive and defensive technologies are more reminiscent of a space-sim than a flight-sim. Each aircraft has a continuous energy supply that serves to power thrusters, absorb damage—much like shields in a traditional space-sim—and repair damage to ship's components to a limited extent. This energy supply powers your energy weapons, which along with projectile weapons and limited numbers of missiles and unguided rockets, can be used to arm your ships.

The *Echelon* back-story is delivered in a lengthy introductory movie that evokes plenty of hackneyed science fiction conventions. From then on, however, the story becomes largely an afterthought, rarely intruding into the game in any appreciable way. Suffice it to say you will be flying for the "Federation" against the dastardly "Velians."

The campaign is static and mostly linear, although it occasionally offers a choice of missions. The 26-missions are difficult from the beginning, and you'll often find yourself wishing for a mid-mission save feature. The campaign proves to be a nice mix of reconnaissance, air patrol, air support, and strike missions, and the further you progress, the greater the number of *Echelon's* wide variety of aircraft that will be available. Occasionally minor scripting errors occur that require you to restart certain missions—something that you may feel compelled to do from time to time anyway because the game seems to have some memory leaks. While there is a certain amount of tedious repetition to the missions, by the time you finish the campaign you'll definitely feel as if you've gotten your money's worth.

That the game is so challenging is one of *Echelon's* most salient—and most refreshing—characteristics. Even if you've chosen the lowest difficulty setting you have to actively avoid trouble if you want any hope of completing the long missions. Reality rarely intrudes too far into games that feature craft with shields, so you'll be shocked when you find out the hard way that enemy tanks, turrets, and missiles can and frequently will destroy you with one well-placed shot.

Echelon's 3D graphics are very attractive and include many impressive effects such as dust trails on the ground raised by low-flying aircraft, intense lens flare, and—when you have the time to switch to an external view and admire your own ship—some really novel ship designs and thruster effects.

On the whole, *Echelon* is a fun game. With difficult missions but a decidedly uninspiring campaign, good military atmospherics, and 3D graphics that rely almost solely on earth tones, it looks a lot like a traditional flight sim. With planes that fly like star fighters, take off and land themselves, and have energy weapons with unlimited ammunition, however, the gameplay is all action.

UPSIDE	Novel take on space sims
DOWNSIDE	At times crosses the line between difficult and tedious
RATING	★★★½

A Jericho Assault Plane.

The planning map where you'll create new units and give them detailed orders.

Hostile Waters: Antaeus Rising

The merging of twitch gameplay and real time strategy continues

RATING ★★★½

GENRE Action DEVELOPER Rage Software [www.rage.com] PUBLISHER Interplay [www.interplay.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

After seeing a wide array of mostly mediocre attempts to merge the action and real-time strategy genres together over the last couple years, gamers might look suspiciously upon the latest offering from Rage Software. But *Hostile Waters: Antaeus Rising* offers up a surprisingly slick and entertaining mix of third-person vehicular mayhem and strategic planning.

Placing you at the helm of a long dormant carrier—the Antaeus—capable of utilizing nanotechnology to create new vehicles and weapons of destruction in seconds, the now peaceful Earth must destroy an underground faction bent on global domination. The hook here is that each of your units is either controlled directly by you or by the mind of dead soldiers whose identity and skills were imprinted on computer chips, called Soulcatchers, seconds before their death during the last war. What this means is that every unit you make (and compared to a standard RTS, you won't make many) has a distinct personality and specific skills.

The units even interact with each other as they go forth to destroy targets and gather resources or payloads. The 21 missions mainly focus on destruction, but offer enough variety to keep things both interesting and challenging. Thankfully, the pilot AI is surprisingly good, so you won't have to constantly baby-sit them while attending to other parts of the map. You can easily take direct control over any unit at any time as well, so twitch gamers will never have to sit back and passively watch the action.

The graphics are sharp, detailed and full of eye candy, and the frequent explosions are particularly impressive. The voice acting for your soul-endowed units (ranging from tanks and hovercraft, to a variety of aerial vehicles), enemy units, and officers is well done. Both the sound effects and powerful background music make the grade as well.

While there's definitely appeal for the action-minded player, there's enough solid strategy here to give the otherwise standard shoot 'em up gameplay a nicely meaty bite. The interface could use some refinement, and the complete lack of multiplayer is perplexing. Just the same, *Hostile Waters* is one of the better hybrids released thus far this year.—*Jason D'Aprile*

Head-to-head gunship matches play out fast and furiously.

Worms World Party

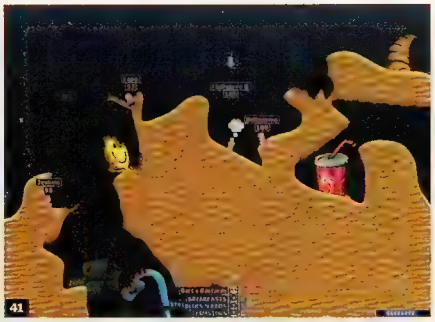
Great fun for newbies, but series veterans have seen it all before

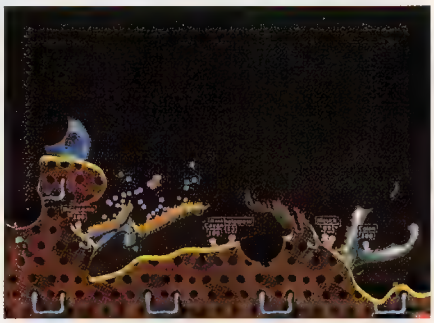
RATING ★★½

GENRE Action/Strategy DEVELOPER Team 17 [www.team17.com] PUBLISHER Titus Software [www.titusgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 100, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-16 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

Working from a strict formula isn't as effective with games as it is with other recreational pastimes. Reading the latest recycled summer potboiler while visiting the beach is miles from the tedium associated with doing the same thing at a keyboard again and again. It's sort of like the difference between throwing a baseball and working at an assembly line. One remains enjoyable for life, the other encourages alcoholism and repetitive stress injuries.

Worms World Party won't be a contributing factor to either of the above problems, though it certainly can be a tedious experience if you've spent some time with its three predecessors. Readers with Team 17's *Worms*, *Worms 2*, and *Worms Armageddon* in their game collections will be very familiar with what this "new" title has to offer.
Presentation is exactly the same, right down to the fuzzy, cartoon visuals that were behind the times when they first debuted in 1995. One thing's for sure—you don't need a state-of-the-art system to experience *Worms World Party* in all its glory.





[above] Worms World Party features the same surrealistic landscapes as its predecessors; Expect lots of carnage in the Deathmatch mode.

Gameplay basics feature the same old lunatic worms taking turns moving across bizarre, colorful 2D maps to kill each other in comical ways. Such mayhem is created thanks to an arsenal of murderous weapons including blasé bazookas and the more intriguing Super Banana Bomb that showers foes in explosive fruit. You can still slaughter your rivals in mission, single map, and deathmatch modes, along with online play. The only additions to Tem 17's aged blueprint are the Wormpot, a neat slot machine that randomly sets up different game options, the Wormoepedia, a catalog of all the game's weaponry, a cooperative multiplayer mode, and a mission editor. Each of these is a nice touch, but doesn't affect the core gameplay in any significant fashion.

If you've never experienced the unique entertainment of ordering worm armies around surreal battlefields, *Worms World Party* is the closest thing to a must-have game to be released this summer. But if you're a veteran at playing with these homicidal creepy crawlies, be warned—you've seen it all before. Save yourself a few bucks and dig *Worms Armageddon* out of the closet.
—*Brett Todd*

Taking the inside line... get out of my way!

The replay utility lets you watch the action and export it to an AVI.

Leadfoot

Put the pedal to the metal

by Steve Bauman

GENRE Racing **DEVELOPER** Ratbag [www.ratbaggames.com] **PUBLISHER** WizardWorks [www.wizardworks.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 266, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-10 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

Despite being from WizardWorks, the hit-and-miss (mostly the latter) publisher of such budget gaming "classics" as *Swamp Buggy Racing*, *Leadfoot* is a great little game that, on a feature-by-feature basis, humbles most of its pricier competition. Set in the blue-collar series of stadium off-road racing, it offers more cars, more tracks, more upgrades, and a race shell that goes beyond seasons and individual races.

Leadfoot straddles the fine line between simulation and action racing as well as any game on the market. It lets you drive cars that range from simple buggies to powerful Supercross pickup trucks on a series of in-stadium dirt tracks, of which there are 12 in all. This doesn't sound like many tracks, but they don't get repetitive. They're small, generally quite twisty, and well designed, with plenty of jumps and opportunities to slide around in full four-wheel drifts. While the tracks themselves look quite good, the game's overall presentation is merely so-so—the vehicles are somewhat odd looking, with bland and fuzzy textures.

While it has the standard race game features—single races, multiplayer (which works fabulously)—developer Ratbag adds a few special things shared with all of their games. For example, many race games offer a replay mode, but how many allow you to edit them and export them as AVI movies? That's more of a gimmick, but the game's career wrapper, which is perhaps shared a little too closely with the *Dirt Track Racing* series of games, lets you enter racing series, win money, earn sponsorships that give you additional cash, upgrade your vehicle, and eventually buy your way into more advanced racing classes. In a subtle touch that shows the attention-to-detail most games lack, the real racing simulated by the game is mostly a hobbyist sport, so Ratbag also gives you a little bit of additional cash after every race to represent your own personal investment. While it could definitely be expanded (perhaps more detail in the sponsors, more emphasis on each racing series, a cap on the number of years you can race), this little bit of role-playing makes the game a lot more interesting than merely having individual races and individual seasons.

Though it stops short of the detail of a Papyrus game such as *NASCAR 4*, *Leadfoot* has plenty of tuning and customization options that have a discernible affect on your on-track performance. On the easiest skill levels you can win with the default settings, but if you're looking to master the game with the slipperiest handling and the AI set at its highest point, you'll find you can skim a few extra seconds off each lap time by adjust tire types, suspension settings, and particularly matching gear ratios to the track. It's a bit cumbersome to use, and the game inexplicably doesn't allow you to test any settings in the single-race mode (there's no qualifying either).

The game does a good job at generating plausible physics, as the cars handle as you'd think they should handle. Even on the hardest physics level they remain controllable, albeit a bit squirrelly. Overall, the game does an amazing job of scaling the difficulty to the ability of the player. When playing the single-player career mode you're always competitive, and as you begin to upgrade your vehicle the skill level of the competition does as well. This sliding difficulty, while somewhat artificial, tends to keep the game from getting too difficult or easy; it's always challenging, though it does take a while to get acclimated to this particular style of racing.

Leadfoot gives budget gaming a good name. Unlike most games of its ilk, it requires no caveats associated with its low price. It's an amazing bargain and would still be an excellent game at double the price.

UPSIDE	Terrific gameplay, great driving action and physics, excellent wrapper, incredible value
DOWNSIDE	No qualifying in single races, a little same-y for fans of other Ratbag games, so-so graphics
RATING	★ ★ ★ ★

Off-Road Redneck Racing

What in tarnation?

by Scott Steinberg

GENRE Inbred Racing **PUBLISHER** Interplay [www.interplay.com] **DEVELOPER** Rage Software [www.rage.com] **REQUIREMENTS** 266MHz Pentium, 48MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-6 players (LAN only), 2 players (split screen) **ESRB** Everyone

Sun, dust, and cutthroat competition await. yeeeeeee-haaaaaw, indeed.

Licensing has its merits. Where would *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* or *Madden NFL* be without the sponsorship of their namesakes? But for every well-planned marketing coup, there's another product sinking into obscurity for lack of proper market positioning. Observe *Off-Road Redneck Racing*, a feeble attempt to cash in on the semi-popularity of a previous shooter. Never mind that this game is merely a slipshod European import dubbed over with Southern fried sound bytes and visuals. It qualifies as redneck simply because the concept behind it was so gosh durn ignorant.

Don't take that the wrong way, however. Despite an ineffectual presentation, you will nonetheless find some solid racing thrills in Interplay's latest budget-priced blowout. While limited options for solo championships and split-screen challenge races may seem like a shallow array of diversions, the gameplay is reasonably fun and (don't laugh) semi-original. How many other PC games let you race as part of a team, or really reward players for nudging rivals into the median? This game isn't the brightest apple on the tree, but it's shiny, tasty, and somewhat juicy if you're willing to take a big bite.

Trackside, matters improve significantly. While joining a team such as the "Horny Toads" or "Jack o'lope" initially provides only one vehicle for active use, skilled drivers can quickly unlock new cars and auto upgrades. If you consistently perform near the top of the pack, you will receive lucrative offers from competitors to switch allegiances, which in turn allows you to graduate from trucks to beetles, dune buggies, and jeeps. A systematic method of player-controlled upgrading might have been more preferable, but the novel progression features are a sometimes surprising and occasionally frustrating curiosity that you can probably live with.

Don't pull over on the dark country back roads, or it'll be Deliverance relived.

The beating that you'll inevitably take when four-wheelin' it through desert canyons, down mountain slopes, or across Everglades territory is less tolerable, however. Opponents play a mean game, using their superior horsepower and foreknowledge of track layouts to give human chumps a wicked spanking. Early on, you must learn the virtues of nudging competitors, cutting corners, and aiming for that ever-elusive perfect path, because inexperienced racers just can't duke it out on straight shots. Virtually nonexistent are the games that prove more challenging right from the get go.

Practice makes perfect, so count on spending a few hours behind the wheel. Memorizing course conditions and mastering what are already fairly workmanlike controls is priority numero uno. Once armed with this knowledge, you can sock it to those annoyingly aggressive jerks who are always charging up your tailpipe. Remember, if the computer won't play fair, fighting dirty is your sole recourse. In a pinch, busting out a limited supply of nitrous helps too. Still there just isn't a substitute for gaining access to more powerful roadsters. Getting over the initial hump can be tough. Advance a little though, and you'll soon advance a lot.

As for the redneck factor, this title's as southern as Manfred from Munchausen. Originally designed for UK audiences by Rage Software, Interplay simply adjusted the program to suit their misguided purposes. So while mud, snow, rain and day/night cycle inclusive 3D visuals look spectacular (if rather stiff), levels such as the slaughterhouse appear as a construction yard and nothing more. As good as the product looks, there was certainly sound reason for giving the product a green card that let it onto American retailers' shelves. Shamelessly branding the game with an uncomfortable license and making only minor cosmetic changes was probably not the best way to go about it, however.

Had someone fortuitously noted that earlier, you might have been spared this somewhat entertaining yet flawed "good ol' boy" racer, not to mention some repetitive, ear-splitting sound effects that were apparently culled from the bottom of a moonshine jug. *Off-Road Redneck Racing* is simultaneously more polished and less appealing than its direct bargain bin competition, depending on how you look at it. Provided you keep the sound on mute, pump up the graphical resolution, and have a few hours to spare, this is decent down-home motor madness, served the finger lickin' way.

UPSIDE	Classy engine, good driving model, fun in spurts
DOWNSIDE	Trashy presentation, repetitive and annoying sound effects, difficulty factor, only LAN support
RATING	★ ★ ★

SPOTLIGHT REVIEW:

USER RATING

Speed	★★★★★
Connectivity	★★★★★
Ease of Use	★★★★★
Reliability	★★★★★
Support	★★★★★

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OUT of the BOX

download blues

Bandwith scarcity is killing the mod community

This download server *is currently at capacity with 300 people currently downloading. All additional users are served on a first-come, first-served basis. There are currently 472 people in line. Estimated wait before your download starts: 47 minutes. Do you want wait in line?*

If you ve downloaded any game mod or add-on over the past few months, the frustrating sentences quoted above should be very familiar. Those words albeit with varying numbers, of course (the above example was taken from a rather foolish attempt at grabbing the *Urban Terror* beta 2 mod for *Quake III* in mid-afternoon) accompany just about every effort at obtaining the hottest mod of the moment from GameSpy s voluminous FilePlanet. Making matters even worse is the lack of a viable, comprehensive alternative. As the computer gaming industry has contracted over the past year with the collapse of the online advertising revenue model, so has the availability of bandwidth. Server time and hard drive space equals serious cash. And with everyone a lot less flush than they used to be, few companies can afford to commit their limited resources to a one-way service that generates zero income.

It wouldn t be too much of an exaggeration to say that bandwidth costs are slowly strangling the online mod community. With the lone exception of GameSpy, which hosts dozens of GamePlanet sites dedicated to specific titles (*PlanetHalf-Life*, *PlanetBaldursGate*, *PlanetDeusEx*, etc.), the major players are no longer hosting mod archives. This has left a number of excellent sites in the lurch, with no place to store third-party add-ons. The only titles to maintain a significant web presence are *Unreal Tournament* and *Quake III Arena*, sales juggernauts that online sites are almost contractually obligated to reserve space for. Games without such high profiles aren t as fortunate. Even *Thief: The Circle of Stone and Shadow*, easily one of the best enthusiast pages online, saw its downloads section go down for months earlier this year because of storage issues.

> "virtually every download turns into a dull wait in line or an exasperating scavenger hunt from website to website, searching for just one link that doesn't lead you to an "HTTP 404 Not Found" dead end."

As a result, virtually every download turns into a dull wait in line or an exasperating scavenger hunt from website to website, searching for just one link that doesn t lead you to an HTTP 404 Not Found dead end. This virtual drudgery can easily absorb all of the leisure hours you d reserved for actual gaming. While researching this column each month, I probably spend just as much time fruitlessly searching for and then waiting to download popular mods as I do actually playing them. I m so hooked on computer gaming that I can t just give up and retreat to more worthwhile pursuits, though I have to wonder if others, who aren t so hopelessly addicted, have chosen a less complicated path. Even watching Monica marry Chandler for the umpteenth time is preferable to shuffling through a virtual queue.

The only solution to this growing problem is more direct involvement by game companies. It shouldn t be enough for the likes of Electronic Arts, Activision, and Infogrames, among others, to simply dump their products on the marketplace and expect users to foot the bill for making them better (and by extension, more popular). They need to establish online mod centers for their games, giving dedicated home designers the opportunity to distribute their work to a wide audience. Just the presence of that sort of support would make some games more attractive to consumers. For example, I know of at least one friend who recently opted to buy *Quake III Team Arena* over *Tribes 2* because he knew that mods for the former would be easy to find online.

Such a move on the part of game publishers might even be necessary. *Quake* s amazing success at building an online community of mod designers would likely be impossible in the current financial climate, due to the rising cost of bandwidth. When id rode user support to the top of the industry, you could barely make your way from one gaming site to the next without running across archives of mod files. Everything was readily available in a way that it isn t today. Duplicating the *Quake* phenomenon with a brand-new gaming franchise would be impossible at present. That s a consideration that publishers should be taking into account every time they offload their responsibilities onto others. ●

Quake III: Sneaking and sniping are big parts of Urban Terror.

Microsoft Train Simulator: Making your way across the English countryside on the Settle–Carlisle route.

World War II Online: Just a brief respite from the long, hard war.

Getting More From...

Quake III Arena

The latest rage in the *Quake III* community is the beta 2 version of the *Urban Terror* mod. The total conversion introduces serious tactical concerns and realism to the original game s gib-a-minute action. It features team-based play that pits a squad of Navy Seals against a group of carnage-loving terrorists. *Quake III* has been completely overhauled for the conversion, which boasts revamped textures and modes of play, along with new weapons and items such as the Franchi SPAS 12 combat shotgun and night vision goggles. More than 25 people have been steadily working on the mod for Silicon Ice Developments since late 1999, and it shows. The depth of gameplay and alteration to basic *Quake III* fundamentals make it a must-have for anyone who s grown a little tired of the standard game modes and the *Team Arena* expansion. Just make sure that you ve got access to a high-speed connection, though; *Urban Terror* clocks in at more than 60 MB.

LINKAGE

Thief
THIEF: THE CIRCLE.COM:
www.theif-darkproject.com

Quake III Arena
URBAN TERROR OFFICIAL SITE
www.urbanterror.net

SILICON ICE DEVELOPMENTS
www.silicon-ice.com

Microsoft Train Simulator
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tss.gametropics.com

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Microsoft Train Simulator

One game you re almost certain to be reading more about in this space during the months to come is *Microsoft Train Simulator*. Within days of the game s release in early June, more than a dozen fan sites went live with feature stories, interviews, forums, and downloads. Everything is still in the early stages as of press time, though it already seems pretty clear that the game s online future is bright. Look for this one to acquire the same sort of devoted cult following as that boasted by its big brother, the *Microsoft Flight Simulator* series. Watch the popularity build at pages like SimTrains.com, which posted the first user-designed mod for *Train Simulator* a German ICE high-speed passenger engine and cars less than a week after the game hit stores. Other promising sites dedicated to both this program in particular and train simming in general include Train Sim Station, Captain Bazza s MS Train Sim Locomotive Works, and Subway Simulator Central.

World War II Online

Despite shipping with more bugs than the bedroll of a Russian soldier at Stalingrad, *World War II Online* has been selling in droves. The massively multiplayer online title debuted in the number three slot on the NPD Intelect (formerly PC Data) sales chart for June 3-9. And as you might expect, such an impressive performance at the cash register has resulted in the development of a strong online community dedicated to the game. So if you re weathering the storm and hoping that Cornered Rat and Playnet can get their acts together, stay at the front lines with officially affiliated sites like Tech Pubs (a fascinating rundown of the game s hardware), OKW: German High Command (the German players clubhouse), Special Operations Executive (a gathering place for the Allies), and even a pair of sites dedicated to everyone s favorite cheese-eating surrender monkeys, the French. Good luck at rewriting history, mon amis.

No One Lives Forever

Monolith Productions has decided to release the source code for *No One Lives Forever*. All of the files necessary to create new adventures for the world s grooviest spy have been posted at the game s official website, along with instructions and requirements. A word of warning, though some programming experience is required to get the most out of Cate Archer. You ll be hard-pressed to see anything but blue screen errors unless you possess some skills with Visual C++ 6.0.

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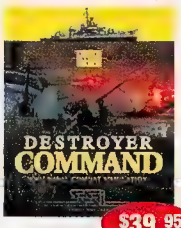

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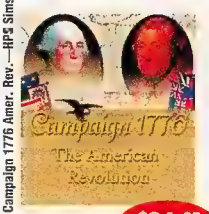

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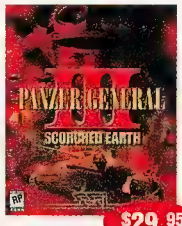

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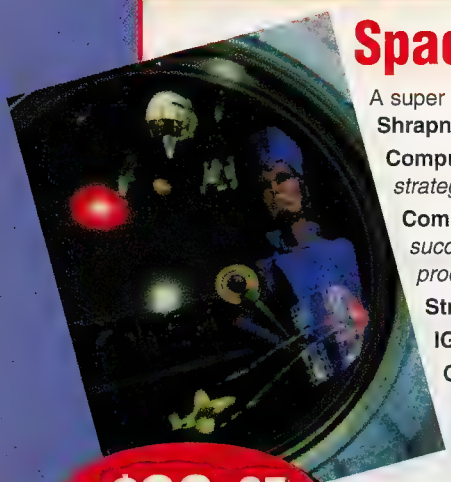

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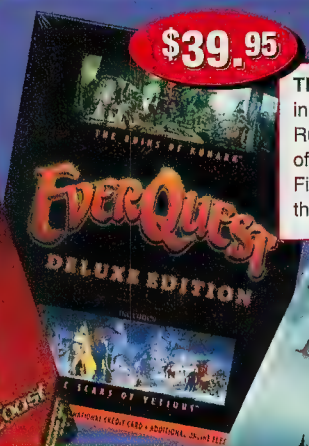

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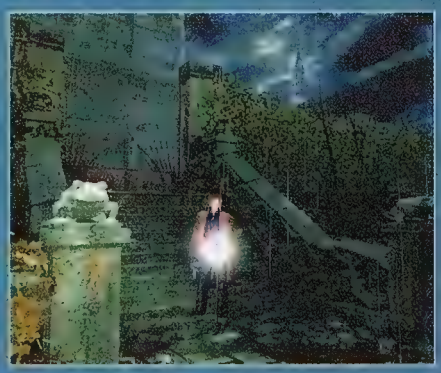
GENRE Action Adventure DEVELOPER Spiral House [us.aloneinthedark.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] INSTALL SIZE 90MB ESRB Teen

Edward Carnby and Aline Cedrac return in the game that created the entire third-person 3D horror genre (yes, *Resident Evil*, you ripped everything off from this games series). One of the first polygonal games in existence, the originals were legendary mixes of action and adventure. In the new game, our intrepid heroes are confronted by yet another mysterious evil. And yes, the camera system is still very... French.



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GENRE Mob Strategy DEVELOPER Hothouse Creations [www.hothouse.org] PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive [www.eidos.com] INSTALL SIZE 240MB ESRB Teen

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GENRE 3D Action DEVELOPER Croteam [www.croteam.com] PUBLISHER Gathering of Developers [www.godgames.com] INSTALL SIZE 104MB ESRB Mature

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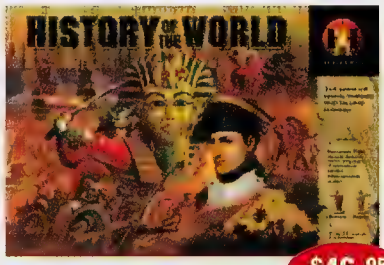

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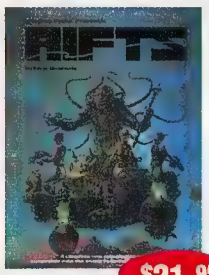

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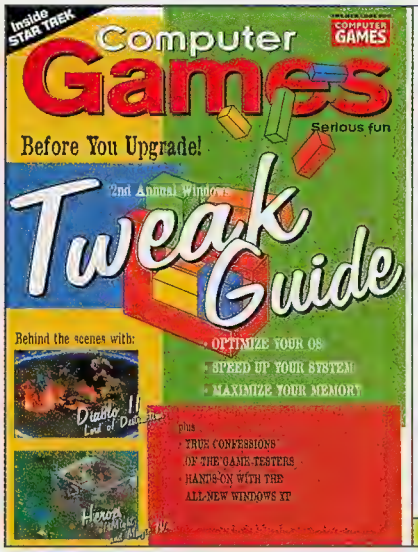

Okay, we got the message: you didn't like our July cover. "I just wanted to say how much I disliked the new cover look. Yeck!," said the aptly named Rawhide. "Compare your cover to other computer games magazines; theirs are professional looking with great graphics that fill the front and are way cool." Ouch. Paul Walther wrote in with, "I asked my sister, a non-computer gamer what she thought, and she said, 'I hope you didn't pay for this thing!'" Double ouch. But Walther also made a key point: It didn't look like any computer game magazine I'd ever seen." And that was kind of the point. People complain about games all looking and playing the same; why expect cookie-cutter magazines? So while the cover may not have been to the liking of some readers, the content itself (which is slightly more important), particularly the cover story, did make some people happy. Read on....

3D Mark-ed improvement...

I would just like to drop you guys a line regarding your "Tweak Guide" in the July issue. After following your suggestions, I benchmarked my system with MadOnion's *3Dmark 2001*. My pre-tweak score was around 1302 and my post-tweak score was 1771. These tips really increased the speed and power of my system!

Thank you for publishing such a helpful article.

Chris Stevenson

No kids allowed

Many times, I looked at my Windows desktop and didn't realize that my son and my wife had other programs running. All this time they were using up valuable RAM and processor time, and I wasn't vaguely familiar with why it was taking so long to download certain websites. Now I know they were the culprits all along. Now by reading this article, I am more aware of what's going on and I know how to handle it. I will simply not let them use the computer anymore....just kidding. Thanks for the great info!

MSG Paul Lealrd,
First Air Cavalry, US Army

Thankful

I must say that I'm *very* thankful for the awesome "Tweak Guide" that you put in your magazine. I love tweaking things to get them working their best, and this article has helped me a lot! Keep up the good work!

Darren Murph

Wonderful

The "Tweak Guide" was wonderful in its entirety. If only once per year such an issue is published, I would gladly continue my subscription to your magazine forever.

Please keep those hardware, utilities and tech-tips coming!

George Brown

Bravo

I would just like to say: bravo! After reading through the "Tweak Guide" and trying a few of the suggestions, I am now able to play many games as I had never played them before... smoothly! You've got a subscriber for life!

Stormblade

Since we have to account for advances in health that could occur in the future to extend your life beyond all reasonable measure, plus take into account inflation, my car payments, etc., please send your check for $12,373.98 for that lifetime subscription to our mailing address at the front of the magazine. Make the check payable to "ed." –ed

End it all

I would like to mention that there is a shareware program called *End It All* that will halt all programs that are running in the "Tool Tray" area of the screen. An added feature of this program is that you can 'protect' certain programs, such as *ZoneAlarm* [*a superb free-for-personal-use software firewall*–ed] to keep running no matter what.

Tom Smith

Windows 2000

I was astounded to see that you actually recommend Windows Me over Windows 2000 Professional for gaming. Most other PC review magazines have claimed and confirmed that Me is approximately 10% slower on many system marks than Windows 98, and 2000 is faster than 98 for most applications. Many large PC manufacturers are avoiding Me as it drops Pentium 4 performance. As for compatibility, 2000 is not game compatible with the first install, but with service packs and proper drivers from the manufacturers' websites, it rocks. Don't confuse this with NT, it can be a great gaming platform.

Gerald D.

Jason Cross responds: I recommend Windows Me over Windows 2000 for several reasons. Windows 2000 is quite a bit more expensive, and while compatibility is less of an issue, it still has issues with a good many games (witness the recent release of Anachronox). Finally, some peripherals don't have workable or mature drivers.

In my experiences, Windows 2000 does outperform Windows Me (or 98) with productivity software, but we're concerned about games here, and they're just plain faster under Me. As for 98 being faster still, my testing doesn't support that, nor have I seen a system offered from any major computer manufacturer in the last eight months that offers 98 instead of Me. In particular, manufacturers focused on gaming systems like Alienware and Falcon Northwest go with Me unless the customer specifically chooses otherwise.

There's nothing wrong with using Windows 2000 as a home operat-

ing system, but if games are your primary concern (and for our purposes they are), it's not optimal.

Winners and losers

For about four years now I've been a PC gamer. I've completed dozens of games and subscribed to a number of gaming magazines. But I have always felt that the worst thing about games was that they were too hard, and I've been consciously expressing that feeling on message boards and to magazines for only the last two or three years, but your editorial ["Winners and Losers"] was the first article I've seen addressing this issue. Thank you.

Why are games too hard? After finishing a game, players are filled with the euphoria of accomplishment, but many suppress the moments of hell they have gone through for that accomplishment. Some even say the game was too easy when actually it wasn't. Too many players and developers are ego-oriented and obsessed with challenge. They fail to understand that challenge is neither the most important part of a game, nor a requirement for satisfaction. A game needs only to be absorbingly interesting.

Developers (at least some) spend too much time developing and not enough time playing. These guys don't fully comprehend how awful a game can become when it becomes intensely frustrating. They can tolerate being told that their game is too hard—people who say that are just wimps, anyway—but they cannot tolerate being told their game is too easy.

Too many players and too many developers fail to understand that easy is not a synonym for bad.

Russell O'Hara

57 sauce

I wanted to thank you for your editorial on game difficulty. I'm delighted that you wrote and published it.

I'm 57 years old and I'm an avid game player. I play every night and I love great strategy and role-playing games. Sid Meier is the man. I've been playing games for a long, long time, since the first *Mario* game in fact, but I got a rude awakening on *Mario 2* when I discovered that I just didn't have the incredible hand-eye coordination of my six-year-old and couldn't get very far, much less get anywhere near finishing the game. He loved it; I hated it. We went on to play a whole lot of games together on consoles and later on 286s and 386s and other computers, and found many games that were tremendous fun. And we found some that were just impossible to play and were no fun at all.

Today, I never know when I pay $45 for a game whether it's going to be something that I can have fun playing, and winning, or whether it will be an object lesson in total frustration. It's always a gamble, and I hesitate a whole lot before purchasing any new game. A lot of games that I buy wind up very quickly on the shelf, or being returned to the store because while they may be terrific technically, they're just impossible to have fun with. And that's what game playing is all about, for me—fun, escape, and enjoyment, not frustration.

I do hope game designers read your editorial and get the message.

Lance Klass

First time

Just got the July issue and have to say hooray for Steve Bauman's article. It conveyed my sentiments exactly. I am a new gamer, and while some of the new games are fun at first, you soon give up on them because you get killed constantly. I recently finished *The Longest Journey* and it was the first game I ever finished. While I had to look for help on forums a lot, it was still nice to survive a game for once.

Thank you for conveying our side of gaming.

Mark M

Hate those movies

Just got the current issue and CD. I subscribe to the CD to get demos, not movies of upcoming games. Hell, I can read about them in your magazine. I want more demos, the way it was prior to this issue.

Tony Casilio

There was a shortage of available demos in that particular month (the industry was in a deep sleep the past 3-4 months), so we filled out the space with movies. We weren't sure about the reaction, but we have no plans to do this on a regular basis. –ed

Testers

Hey there. I wanted to tell you guys how much I enjoyed your article on game testers ["True Confessions of the Game Testers"]. I am currently trying to get a job as a tester, and the article gave me a great deal of insight into the position.

Rayburn Odom

How to get in

I liked your article on game testers, but there was one small thing I didn't understand. Do you have to start as a tester to get in the gaming industry, or is that just an easier or optional way to get in? You didn't really explain it, but it was still a good article

grummzaire

It's not the only way but one of the easier ones. You can create mods, levels, or scenarios, learn to program, run fansites… we hope to cover more ways to break into the industry in future articles. –ed

Just playing games

Sure these people may have to test the same game over and over again and look for flaws. But c'mon. These people are playing video games. They have one of the coolest jobs out there, and in my eyes have no room to complain.

Game testing is game testing and instead of thinking about how bad the job is, why not try imagining yourself a sewer drainage worker. And you don't ever here of a sewer worker complaining.

Givemeabreak

The grass is always greener over the septic tank. –ed

Color blinded

I have been a huge PC gamer for years and the biggest gripe I have with most games, past and present, is that almost none take color blindness into consideration. A considerable percentage of men suffer from some color deficiency, yet it's almost never addressed. Most strategy games use red as a default player or AI color. This can be a problem if you can't see this color. I can't stress how much I would love to be able to change the colors to something easier to see. In multiplayer or skirmish modes the colors can be changed but not in single player mode. This is truly a shame. I know several games that I would be able to play better if I could see the enemy on the mini maps.

The only game I know to address color blindness is *Alpha Centauri*. Sure, it was a large patch to download, but I would download a patch ten times larger for the ability to

change the color scheme that is easier to see for any game.

Jamie Cymbola

What about it, developers? Why don't you allow more options to change colors? –ed

Afterlifing

I am webmaster of *The Massassi Temple* (www.massassi.net), a *Jedi Knight* web site mentioned in your June issue. I just wanted to say thanks for mentioning us. We've worked hard on the site for over three years (honestly, it's been around that long) and it's nice to get some recognition.

Just to let you and your readers know, we plan on covering the upcoming *Jedi Knight 2* as well. The site is in the middle of a facelift and a much-needed reorganization, but rest assured we will still support the *Jedi Knight* community even after the sequel comes out.

I also wanted to mention the fact that the site (and in fact, *Admiral's Command Chamber*) would never have existed if not for the folks at Code Alliance (www.code-alliance.com). They're the ones that created the editor (Jed) and all the other editing utilities that our visitors use to create the levels.

Brian Lozier

Praise for the Sausage

I would just like to say that I think the "Inside the Sausage Factory" series by Phil Steinmeyer is the best I've seen in a magazine in a very long time. I look forward to it each month. It makes me feel like I'm part of the project.

Not only that, it provides me with a greater understanding of the passion these men and women have for their games. I wish Phil great success with *Tropico* and hope you as editors continue this type of column.

Dave

Healthy living

I just finished reading July's Rebound and was just wondering what type of health plan are you on? From the physical symptoms I read—back pain, tiredness, hunger—it sounds like you need to get a new plan for your health. All us computer geeks need our exercise. So get out there and be social. Lift weights. Get buff. Don't take crap from all those whiney people that do nothing but write complaint e-mails!

Luke Fast

Sitting at the computer all day eating Twinkies and drinking Mountain Dew has made me invincible! I'm 100% artificially preserved! I'm not actually living! –ed

Errata: There were a couple of inaccuracies with our preview of Combat Mission 2 in the July issue. Relative spotting is a feature in the game and will not be limited to the next game, *Barbarossa to Berlin*. And while the Finns will be in the next Combat Mission game, BTS has no plans at this time to cover the Winter War between Finland and the USSR. In our August issue, we listed the incorrect developer and publisher for *The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind*. The correct company is Bethesda Software in both instances. We regret the errors.

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THE HORROR!

A look at horror-themed games, past, present and future

Just in time for Halloween, in a weird kind of way (yeah, the October issue is in September, which makes this weird... we don't understand it either, and we work here).

CONTROL FREAK

Find the gamepad, joystick, or wheel that's right for you

If you're wondering which controllers are worth it and which should've stayed in the testing lab for a few more months, read on.

Note: In the August "Coming Soon" we teased a special "Top Secret Cover Story." Well... Stronghold isn't that game, as it's not exactly top secret. The game that was originally going to be featured on our September cover magically turned into a console-only game the day our writer was at its publisher's offices to see it. These things happen.

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CINDY YANS

road to nowhere

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Should an expansion diminish the original game

Let's see... shall I put the dexterity-enhancing jewel in the claw-class weapon, or save it for some armor down the road? Do I have enough health potions? And *where* shall I put those last two skill points? There's no point in hoarding them any longer—or is there?

Oh, it's you. Let me take a moment out of my *Diablo II* Assassin's busy schedule to share a few thoughts about the *Lord of Destruction* expansion to Blizzard's latest signature *Diablo* game. My Assassin Fistella has been having the time of her life, and I of mine, spending way too many hours in a game I thought I had "outgrown" quite a while ago.

Many people, including myself, are calling *Lord of Destruction* the definitive example of how an expansion pack should be done. It seems, in fact, that the revisions to the original game that came with the add-on represent the real evolution of the product.

My review [see page 70] talks about how Blizzard has not only added one new act to *Diablo II*, but has completely revamped it. At first glance, this seems to have been a magnificent feat—an "above and beyond the call of duty" endeavor, allowing players to experience what Blizzard's vision has *always* been of its *Diablo* sequel. But wait a minute. Blizzard, no marketing idiot, might have had a whole different agenda.

> "The high-level players who have so carefully crafted their characters are somewhat stunted in a gameworld that has evolved without them... Is this fair?"

Four or so million people bought the original product and spent countless hours during the last year, working their characters toward their highest ideals, sometimes restarting them over and over again to achieve the perfect Barbarian, or the perfect Necromancer. During the expansion release, it was necessary for the developers to patch the original game in order to actualize their New and Improved *Diablo* game world. Marvelous, right? Well, yes, for a lot of us...but it is clear that in doing so, they were preventing the people who owned only the original from playing the same game they've been playing since June 2000 (with minor tweaks). A lot of these people have been complaining that the game no longer "works" for them. They built characters in one way, and now find that their characters, although not unplayable, by any means, are not offering the optimum experience.

Over the years my colleagues and I have often bandied about the question, "How valuable is an expansion pack? What does it actually add to the game?" A few levels, a new unit, another campaign... all of these seemed, well, "nice," but we always concluded that the quintessential add-on is one that actually makes the game better.

One of my favorite expansions of late is *Age of Empires: The Conquerors*. It has new units and new campaigns, sure, but it also brings with it vast improvements in gameplay and balance. Some changes are large, some not so large, but it manages to reach that "making the original game better" pinnacle better than almost anything else out there. The difference here is that owners of *Age of Empires II* are not affected by the expansion. They can choose to buy it or not. People who cannot afford to, or choose for some other reason not to acquire *The Conquerors* may remain perfectly happy in their *Age of Empires II* universe.

With *Lord of Destruction*, it's different. The single-player-only folks who've never taken the game online are unaffected, but let's face it, *Diablo II* is at its heart an online game, and when you log on... the patch descends upon you—uninvited. It has to be this way, actually, for the same online world to be shared. It seems as though the millions who bought the original are almost forced to purchase the add-on in order to have a satisfactory experience. Without the new goodies that the expansion offers, but with all of the other changes the release has foisted upon them, the high-level players who have so carefully crafted their characters are somewhat stunted in a game world that has evolved without them.

Is this fair? Probably not, but I'm sure that most of the four million people who fell in love with the game will buy the expansion. In fact, as The Most-Definitive Add-On Ever, it's something they probably should buy...at about $35 a pop. Think Blizzard has a calculator? I do. ●

The invasion begins...

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PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

sell, sell!

The ups and downs of the sales chart

At the time of this writing, *Tropico* has been in stores now for about seven weeks, and much to our delight, it is selling well. The three biggest markets for PC games are the U.S., Germany, and Britain, respectively, and our game has been continuously in the top 10 since its release in all three countries, and is at #1 in Germany as I write this. In fact, I've been studying the sales charts with a rather keen interest of late, both to keep an eye on the game's performance, and to plan our next game, and make sure we choose a niche with strong sales potential.

For much of the last two years, with my nose to the grindstone working on *Tropico*, I've largely ignored sales charts and magazines, and gotten my small fill of game industry news and gossip from popular gaming web sites such as *Blue's News* (www.bluesnews.com) and *Voodoo Extreme* (www.voodooextreme.com). These and most other Internet sites tell a daily story of the great achievements of current and future PC games—the stars of these sites are *Half-Life*, *Quake* and *Unreal*. This focus on first-person shooter action games carries over to various back-channel communication lines between game developers. Developers posting .plan files (which are updates that are linked to and read all over the web) and writing articles for Game Developer magazine and the Gamasutra web site (www.gamasutra.com) hail mainly from action gaming powerhouses such as Raven, Epic, and Valve. Developers like PopTop sometimes feel like backwaters in the quiet, small genre of strategy games. *Tropico* doesn't even use a full 3D engine <gasp!>.

> "Ladies and Gentlemen, strategy games aren't just nudging out other genres—this is a full-scale rout."

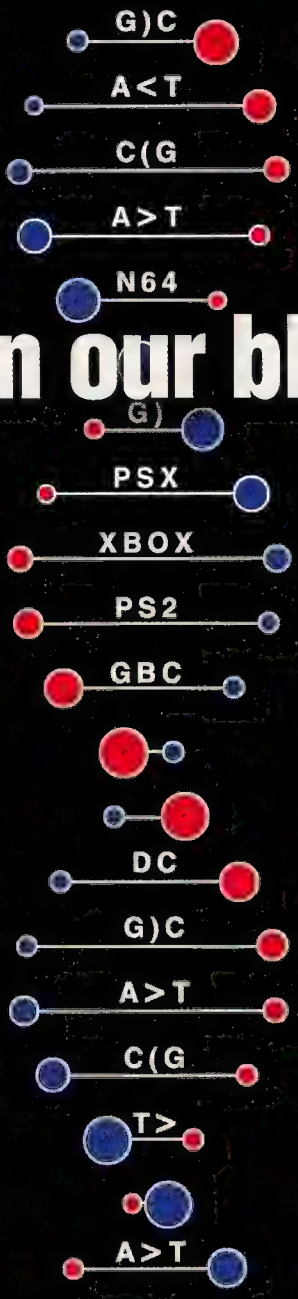
But the sales charts tell a different story. In the U.S. sales charts for mid-June, strategy games occupy seven of the top 10 slots. Germany also has seven strategy games in its top 10, and in Britain, nine of 10 are strategy games. The preponderance of strategy titles isn't due to a recent glut of strategy releases—four of the seven U.S. strategy entries were released last year, and the other three (including *Tropico*) have all been out for at least six weeks.

Ladies and Gentlemen, strategy games aren't just nudging out other genres—this is a full-scale rout.

What does this mean for the gaming public? There's been a lot of doom and gloom among developers and the gaming press about the imminent demise of PC gaming. Given that the focus of the most vocal developers and gaming web sites is on first-person action games, the pessimism isn't surprising. That genre is decreasing in size. It won't go away, but it's unlikely that gamers will be blessed with more than 3-4 major 3D shooters per year, versus the dozens that have come out in recent years. Action fans, go forth and buy yee a console. There are plenty of outstanding action games coming out this Christmas for Playstation 2, Gamecube, and Xbo... errr... at least for PS2 and Gamecube.

If PC action gaming is struggling so badly, why does it dominate gaming web sites? Frankly, this has puzzled me a bit throughout the growth (and recently, collapse) of these sites. Whereas most strategy games have a long, deep campaign primarily geared for solo play, first-person shooters are built mostly for multiplayer play [*though the main cost is on generating a single-player game* -ed]. To play against other players on-line, you typically need the latest patch and mods for your game. All this drives FPS fans to the gaming sites in great numbers. Moreover, first-person shooter fans are typically younger (i.e. more internet-savvy), and have better hardware and faster Internet connections than the average gamer. FPS fans may be a relatively small group (judging by sales numbers), but they are vocal, and distort impressions of what types of games are truly popular and selling well.

We still haven't completely decided on the topic for our next game, but it *will* be a PC strategy game. It's unlikely to show up in the "most anticipated" lists of the gaming web sites (if they haven't all gone belly-up by then). But if we do our jobs well, it'll be on far more important lists—the sales charts of the U.S. and Europe. ●



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THREE finger salute

b nus g mi g

W at s mi s ng fr m Emp ror: Bat le f r D ne

Thank you for reading this column. Since you are a registered reader, you re entitled to bonus words not found in the Standard Edition Column. Your bonus words are as follows:

1. Chick
2. amiss
3. donut
4. bicycles

Just plug them into the proper place and enjoy.

The box didn't feel like it was missing anything when I grabbed it from the shelf. *Emperor: Battle for Dune*, Westwood s new real time strategy game, felt about as heavy as a computer game should. But after playing a few games, something seemed [2]. Normally when you build a new structure in a real-time strategy game, it unlocks new units. *Emperor* is no exception. Build a factory and you can build tanks. Upgrade it and you can build new kind of tanks. But for some reason, nothing happens when I build a hangar. Once I upgrade it, I can build aircraft. But why the unnecessary step of building the hangar and then upgrading it? Is there a unit missing?

Then I played a few multiplayer games and discovered that aircraft were too powerful. Unlike the game s other units, there is no specific counter for aircraft, so they can run amok. But I vaguely remembered something I d seen in the manual, something about air defense units. Sure enough, there they were, one unit for each of the three sides. Come to think of it, I d seen the computer use them! How come I could never build them?

> "This is a new low in the history of incomplete games. At least when Origin sold speech packs, they were just leaving out an aesthetic element."

Here s why: because Westwood cut them from the game, called them bonus units , and offered them only to people who bought *Emperor* as part of a special promotional offer with certain retailers. This will give these players a distinct advantage during multiplayer games, Westwood quietly notes at the bottom of a press release. Darn right. Because far from being bonus units , these are an integral part of the game s balance. There is a conspicuous gap after you ve built a hangar where air defenses are supposed to enter the game. Without them, there is an intentional hole in the middle of Emperor: Battle for Dune. It is a veritable [3] of a game.

This is a new low in the history of incomplete games. At least when Origin sold speech packs, they were just leaving out an aesthetic element. Then there are the incomplete games that can be attributed to incompetence, oversight, or inexperience: not enough server support for *Ultima Online*, *Diablo II*, *World War II Online*; the long overdue online Dynaverse for *Starfleet Command II*; all the missing features from Sierra s infamous *Outpost*; and, of course, all the games with inadequate manuals.

We ve grown too accustomed to buying a game and not getting the entire product in the box that we bring home. And now Westwood has crossed a new line by intentionally leaving out an important part of *Emperor*, punishing people who don t buy it from specific retailers by not giving them a complete game. This will all be moot by the time you read this, as Westwood has promised to unlock these units a month after the game s release, but the precedent has been set. Of course, gamers are sheep, willing to be led around by the nose when this sort of thing happens. I fully expect Westwood s next game will require the purchase of a separate Graphics Pack.

I guess my main concern is what will happen if Westwood tries to diversify. What if they try to sell [4] to children? We know they look like unicycles, the Westwood salesman will explain to a little child shopping for her first bike, but they re actually bicycles. Our special customers get a bonus second wheel. What if Westwood gets a job in public education and tries to teach fractions, chemistry, and political science to our children? Will they ride their one-wheeled bicycles to school and learn that 1/2 + 1/3 = 1, that an oxygen molecule is made of a single oxygen atom, and that the U.S. government consists of two branches?

I guess my point here is that, for the sake of the children, Westwood should go back to providing us with complete games before things get out of hand. In the meantime, I ll be over here playing *Emperor*, watching my base get overrun with aircraft. ●

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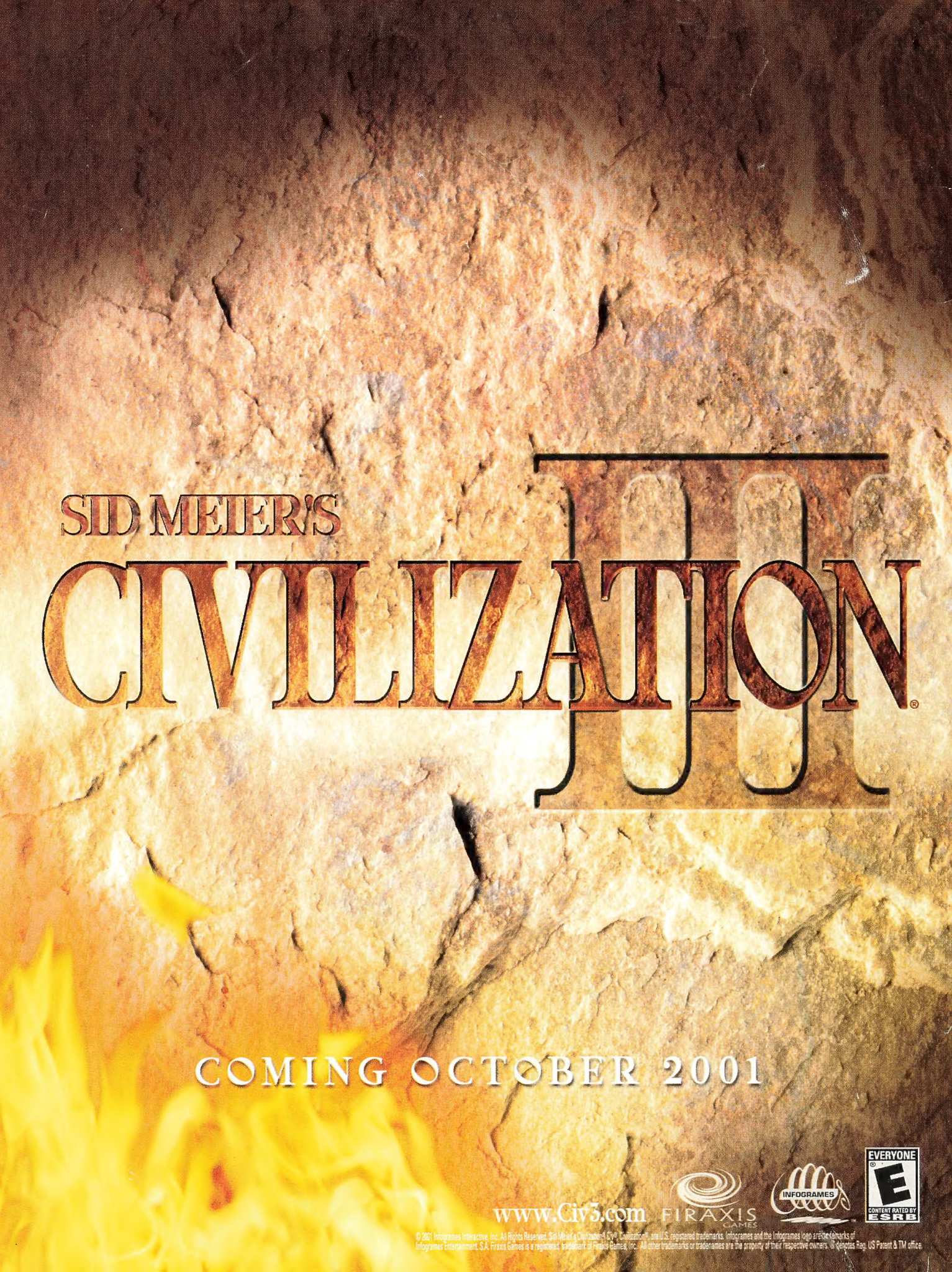

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